

THE END TIMES

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to Mom and Dad, of course.

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ABSTRACT

The End Times is a collection of apocalyptic short stories set within the same universe. The stories employ elements of magical realism and grit lit. It is the author's hope that each story deal with at least one external societal issue (such as digital discourse and sexual aggression) and one internal psychological issue (such as depression, obsession/compulsion, and survivor's guilt). Each story is told in the first-person in an effort to best demonstrate the various psychologies of its protagonist. In these stories, God has decided to punish humanity for their transgressions. The devices of this God are fantastic: limbs disappear, women speak under pools of water, and dark creatures come out of the ground in droves. The stories are set in Georgia and South Carolina. Rural, suburban, and urban locales are utilized. Though religious allegories and references are present, this book is not concerned in any way with religion. The intention of this work is to explore issues of violence, judgment, punishment, mental health, and redemption. Two stories, "Hammerless" and "Rednecks of the Universe," exist outside of *The End Times* thematically and universally. "Hammerless" deals with sexual liberation and gender discrimination. "Rednecks of the Universe" deals with the ironies of class. Both stories take place primarily in the Midwest. These stories are meant to showcase interests and abilities of the author outside of those demonstrated in *The End Times*, for better or for worse.

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Introduction

The most important objective in writing these stories was to combine grit lit and magical realism in ways that would entertain and provoke the reader.

I am very interested in the similarities between these two genres: their bizarre and compulsive characters, their mythic environments, the despair inherent in their physical and psychological landscapes. While some incredible hybrids of magical realism and grit lit already exist (Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* immediately comes to mind), I believe there are still plenty of opportunities for growth and exploration in this area of literature. My stories hope to chart a little of this territory.

As its title suggests, *The End Times* is a collection of stories occupied with finality and judgment. In part, I wanted the collection's foci to echo the attitudes of our present culture. I believe the majority of our society finds solace in judging and attacking one another, as evidenced by the toxic discourse prevalent on social networks such as Twitter, Facebook, Reddit, etc. I do not think this is a recent phenomenon; in fact, I believe the denigration of others is an intrinsic, albeit embarrassing, part of the human condition. Online networks, easy to access and affording some personal protection via distance and the possibility of anonymity, only encourage the meanness available in most, if not all, of us.

Of course, in attacking others, one assumes a sort of moral, intellectual, or artistic highground. There is some irony in taking this position: thanks to the unavoidable connections of our recently digitized society, we are all, for better or worse, passive participants to some degree in what we oppose. Only extreme isolation or suicide changes this.

Technology in the twenty-first century simultaneously grants us instantaneous communication on a massive scale and removes us empathetically from one another, presenting a duality that raises, or at least re-emphasizes, serious and complicated ethical questions regarding relationships. At what point, and to what degree, are we culpable for the unintended consequences of our actions? Are we, in any way, responsible for the actions of our society? What sins are truly unforgivable? What punishments are truly just? Who decides what someone deserves or doesn't deserve in their life? Have we lost our willingness, perhaps even our ability, to understand those with whom we disagree? How far can empathy stretch before it snaps?

My stories hope to address these questions concerning human interaction. They do not attempt to provide any suggestions or answers. Rather, I hope these violent and self-destructive stories will encourage readers to challenge their conceptions of how we should treat one another. I offer an example of what might happen were an omnipotent entity to refuse, as we refuse, understanding, relating, forgiving. Perhaps, in a culture so attracted to communal scrutiny, it is only through violent catastrophe that we will finally decide to morally investigate ourselves. But then it might be too late.

The people in these stories are purposefully and obviously very flawed. These stories feature a serial rapist, an unfaithful narcissist, and a selfish alcoholic, among others. It should go without saying, but my choice of protagonist is not a personal endorsement of said protagonist's perspectives, biases, or actions. In fact, that is part of the reason for writing these people: in creating stories that ask us to question our ability to love one another, I chose to write characters that challenged my ability to love them and find love, or the possibility of love, in them. I believe few people in this world are truly and completely good or evil, and it is for this reason I strove to create characters that, as reprehensible as they and their actions were, did not possess definitively evil psychologies. This is part of the reason why the rapist is not comfortable or joyous in his decisions and becomes mournful of his actions, why the narcissist is undone by his oversized desire for love and acceptance, why the alcoholic knows, somehow, his turn to disappear will come. Again, this neither condones nor justifies how these characters think or act. The stories only ask that we consider the possibility that we may, at some level, understand them. And what is understanding if not a first step toward empathy?

Also, I find stories with thoroughly good or bad protagonists tedious and predictable.

I tend to agree that stories primarily feature four distinct conflicts: character vs. environment, character vs. themselves, character vs. character, and character vs. God. In every story in *The End Times*, I set out to do four things:

1. address a contemporary societal issue (character vs. environment)
2. address a psychological flaw in the human condition (character vs. themselves)
3. refer to other stories through narrative, behavioral, and symbolic recurrences (character vs. character)
4. provide an allusion to at least one other religion or mythology (character vs. God)

For example, in "Revival," I wanted to address the contemporary issue of commercialized intolerance (Fox vs. CNN, for example). I also wanted to illustrate, through the racist and bigoted views of Buddy Sampson, more personalized examples of intolerance and ignorance. While I do not wish to provide every instance in which "Revival" interacts with its sibling stories (really, what fun is that for anyone?), I will give readers one instance. In "Revival," water is a source of comfort (its absence creates tension) and fire is a source of discomfort (its inclusion creates tension). This is an inversion of the roles water and fire play in "After," where fire appears early on as a symbol of safety for Evelyn (it keeps away the dark things, it hints at signs of life), just as Mason's increasing preoccupation with water, and his awareness of its presence, increases as he builds himself up to attack Evelyn. It is no coincidence that water becomes scarce at the same time fire becomes prevalent in "Revival," and it is for this same reason that fire becomes scarce and water becomes prevalent in "After." Sometimes the shared symbols are small: a bat ties it to "Sleep." And so on. Last,

"Revival" covers the point in Christian Armageddon when the first horn is blown after the seventh seal is broken, as mentioned in Revelation 8:7:

"The first angel sounded his trumpet, and there came hail and fire mixed with blood, and it was hurled down on the earth. A third of the earth was burned up, a third of the trees were burned up, and all the green grass was burned up."

It is my intention that every story include all four of these specific efforts. Whether I succeeded is entirely up to the reader.

There is a personal component to these stories in line with the philosophy of accountability and responsibility to which these stories wish to adhere. While I do believe that much of contemporary culture's judicious actions are more influenced by the catharsis of public admonition than by any ethical or moral persuasion, I also believe that current movements such as #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter are vital and beneficial to the positive advancement of society. Not only do these movements seek to empower marginalized and disenfranchised groups of people, they also demand that groups of power, especially straight white men, reflect on their privilege and the unfair system that has sustained their disproportionate advancements. Such reflection requires an understanding of one's history, a moral inventory and assessment, and an acceptance of one's own participation, willing or unwilling, conscious or ignorant, within their systems of privilege.

The stories in this collection are meant to provide some of this reflection. They are a reckoning of the author, his flaws, his demons, and his history. To illustrate more accurately this attempt at self-assessment, a brief history of the author is provided, particularly the events and psychological developments that most influenced these writings:

My first decade of living was pleasant and simple. I was healthy and happy and had many friends. My parents were both teachers, lower-middle-class. They taught at a very wealthy public school (mostly white) and the two neighborhoods in which I grew up were low-crime, heterogenous, and surrounded by affluence. My interests included soccer, tae kwon do, and writing/drawing comics. I was also interested in books at an aesthetic level and to a compulsive degree; before I was ten, I was writing the first few pages of our family's Webster Dictionary, word for word, over and over again, paying special attention to the proper uses of bold, italics, columns, and phonetic symbols. I did the same for large parts of our family Bible, and any other hefty book filled with strange print in small font. This was the first of many obsessions.

My first experience with counseling and psychological therapy began when I was four or five years old. I was terrorized in dreams by the Wicked Witch of the West. In one dream, I remember her coming through my window via a bolt of lightning and hovering over my bed. In another dream, I followed my parents and infant sister into a dark basement (that did not exist in real life). In the basement,

the Witch appeared, her head on the body of a giant spider, who chased me and pinned me down on the basement staircase.

Domestic issues began in middle school. For the sake of privacy for those involved, I won't go into too much detail about what happened inside the home. Suffice it to say, my homelife was in a state of constant turmoil, and I became very angry and alone. At school, my compulsions and obsessions, especially regarding books and "nerdy" pursuits, ostracized me. I had very few friends. I discovered I liked girls and that they didn't like me. I thought of suicide often. A church counselor suggested to my parents they keep me in my room and take away my possessions if I acted up. I spent many days and nights after school alone with very little in my room.

In high school, I started a punk band with one of my best friends. Suddenly, I was cool again. Girls liked me, though I didn't know how to respond to this change in attitude and frequently doubted their interest. I still hated myself, but in secret. I started drinking and doing drugs, including cocaine, meth, and prescription pills. My grades suffered and I was kicked out of school, then another "alternative" school. Between the drugs and the music scene in which I was involved, my environments and friend groups grew increasingly unstable and dangerous. Once, I did so many different drugs in quick succession that I was unable to speak coherently for a day. Another time, I overdosed and was resuscitated by my best friend. My mother told me years later that she would find me asleep on the floor and wake me up and, still groggy, I would ask her to kill me. Around this time, I was diagnosed bipolar.

At sixteen, I was admitted to a short-term in-patient facility for "behavioral disorders." A mandatory drug test revealed to my parents my bad habits. Soon after my release, I was admitted again and tested positive again. From there I moved to a long-term treatment facility, where I spent the next thirteen months. The first four were spent mostly indoors, in a small cubicle, roughly six-by-three feet. Interaction outside of two daily group psychotherapy sessions and occasional recreational activity was strictly forbidden. I wrote song lyrics in my head and thought more about suicide.

After that facility, I was sober but confused and deeply unhappy. In college, I drank heavily and started having regular panic attacks. I also started having sex, mostly quick and drunken hookups. I craved attention and feared intimacy. I wanted girls to like me and panicked when they did. My unhealthy attitudes toward sex hurt people and my interactions with women at this time remain some of the most shameful moments of my life.

I dropped out of college and bounced around many different odd jobs: Walgreens clerk, unloading trailers at Target, door-to-door progressive campaign coordinator, movie theater employee (usher, concessions, and box), tree-removal salesman, Radioshack employee, Starbucks barista, etc. I was fired from almost every job (at Walgreens, I was fired for giving away over fifteen hundred dollars in merchandise). Around 24, I became a bartender, and stuck with the job for almost five years (I was fired twice and rehired the same night in both instances). Bartending allowed me to continue my unhealthy relationship with women and drinking.

At 28, a few things happened to push me in the direction of school. Dissatisfaction and drinking were ruining my mental and emotional wellbeing (I started to suffer from bouts of severe depression and manic episodes and was once again diagnosed bipolar). The bar was in the process of relocating and I was paid on retainer. My grandmother and great-uncle died in quick succession and left me a sizable inheritance. I had lots of free time and started reading profusely. After reading *Just Kids* and *Live from New York: The Oral History of Saturday Night Live*, I decided to go back to college. I knew I wanted to write. I went to community college, did well, and made it to Ole Miss on the advice of one of my creative writing professors, Jake Sullins: "If you want to keep writing like this, go there and find Tommy Franklin."

I have used this latest opportunity for growth to write stories that will hopefully contribute in a positive manner to contemporary conversations on ignorance, violence, intimacy, and mental health. By creating protagonists with severe flaws, some of whom are capable of severe transgressions, I hope this exercise in self-reflection will challenge others, especially privileged others, to reflect extensively on themselves and their entitled histories. I also hope it challenges understanding, even empathy, in whoever reads this collection. I recognize that today's discourse in America is highly contentious and divisive. By accepting that none of us are perfect, that we would all fall short of the expectations of a perfect God, that there is a soul somewhere in all of us, and that redemption is only possible--not in spite of--but *because of* human wickedness, perhaps then empathy can build and, in time, heal these divisions.

Were the stories to be placed chronologically, they would appear as follows: "Revival," "Sleep," "Hug," "Rob," "Dig," and "After." It should be noted that the events in "Revival," though beginning before "Sleep," does not end until just before "Dig" (in fact, it is not impossible that the two stories, despite their distinct voices, share the same narrator).

It was one of my earliest decisions not to present the stories chronologically, a decision I like to believe was made for more than the sake of contrived cleverness. Instead, I chose this specific order for these stories because I wanted to subvert at least one claim I believed a previous story might offer. While the stories contain many thematic and symbolic overlaps, I did not want readers to get "comfortable," i.e. I did not want them to think every story had exactly the same message, that every character operated in the same way or for the same reasons, or that various psychological flaws and traumas would produce essentially the same flawed character. Thus, the behaviors of my narrators, the events of each story, and the types of punishment displayed all became crucial to finding an appropriate sequence for these stories.

Through Mason's actions and motivations, I hope the reader gets an idea early in this collection that the supernatural elements in this story are not the only, or even primary, sources of concern. Despite all of its fantasy and magic, I believe *The End Times* is, at its core, a human story, and I believe "After" best foregrounds this humanity. In terms of obstacles, arguably the biggest obstacle for Mason is not the dark things (they are gone) or his transgressions (he can rationalize these to an extent) but the eventual appearance of other people, a

society he now understands he does not want and in which he cannot comfortably function.

In the next story, "Sleep," Mason's rejection of society is mirrored by the external and internal qualities of Chris's reality. As an ex-con fighting to sleep, Chris (like Mason) is both rejected by society and struggling to detach from it. And like Mason, Chris finds the inclusion of "others" a source of distress. Also like Mason, Chris spends the majority of his narrative in close proximity to another woman (in this case, his mother). What "Sleep" adds to *The End Times*, and one reason I placed it next, is its domesticity. With its post-apocalyptic setting, "After" offers isolation by default; "Sleep" suggests isolation, exacerbated by societal ostracization, is so personal it can happen even in shared spaces (like the suburbs, or a family's home).

I also believe, after the violence and depravity of "After," that Chris's reference to the distant past as "the bad days" holds a certain humor.

While "Sleep" features a character struggling to be left alone, "Rob" presents a narrator desperate for inclusion (especially when this inclusion could offer him free drinks). This narrator is so hopelessly entangled in the lives of his fellow bar patrons that he is rarely able to demonstrate, much less understand in any meaningful way, a personality of his own. I thought it would be fitting, then, to leave this narrator nameless, a decision I would revisit (for different reasons) in "Revival" and "Dig." "Rob" introduces a few other recurring symbols, such as, but not limited to, unidentified men with melted faces and houses burning down. What "Rob" adds to "After" and "Sleep" is a first-person point-of-view from someone not directly punished by magical elements, at least not at the time of the story itself. With "Rob," we realize that it does not take the presence of people or magic or violence to make us, in some ways, disappear.

As I've mentioned, "Rob" is narrated by someone so unaware of himself he cannot give himself a name in his own story. "Hug" represents a violent shift in this attitude: we know right away that Todd is a man who wants everyone to notice him. He tailors his life and his relationships purely on the attention they garner him. In addition to his name, the narrator of "Rob" does not include any description of himself; Todd in "Hug" spends the first few paragraphs describing himself in vivid, perhaps uncomfortable detail. We also revisit fascinations with bodies of water, a motif first introduced in "After" and revisited later in "Dig."

I've already said a lot about "Revival." Too much, most likely. Suffice it to say that "Revival," more of a "sprawling saga" kind of story, hopefully manages to add bits of glue between the other stories, solidifying them as existing in relative close proximity both in time and location. As far as narrators go, we once again have an inversion of focus: where Todd in "Hug" places himself in the foreground of his story, the (unnamed) narrator of "Revival" is deep in the background, so deep, in fact, that Buddy acts as a second narrator.

Of all the stories, I am most comfortable in the placement of "Dig" at the end of *The End Times*. First, I believe it complements the psychological aspect of its narrator, a woman who suffers with the trauma of survivor's guilt. What better way to show this painful survival than by having her story exist after all of the death and brutality of the previous stories? I also think it adds context to her story vital to understanding the motivations and reactions of her character; and

not just her character, but other characters as well (for example, it is not too difficult to read the story by itself and get a sense that Luke's refusal to burn the dollhouse stems from his losing a daughter. But thanks to the burning of houses in "Revival," the turmoil and grief and fear in Luke is so much more complicated, more palpable, more dreadful in its possibilities). Additionally, we get a better understanding of the narrator's world: this is not just any apocalypse, but a specific apocalypse, in which the most violent punishment (so far) came not from any supernatural entity but from everyday people murdering other everyday people. How this influences the narrator's decision to visit her childhood vacation spot, her obsession with accomplishing a previously impossible task, and her reaction to the melted-face man are all, I believe, more interesting in context.

My favorite part of placing "Dig" at the end of this collection, however, is the way in which it circles back to "After." Inspired partly by the circular nature of mandalas, I love the idea of a narrative structure that contains the potential to circle back on itself. I believe *The End Times* has such potential. First of all, they work together chronologically: "Dig" happens a few months before "After," with no other stories existing in between. Second, they both feature characters obsessed with bodies of water, though it is valuable to note that, while Mason is left in the water wondering if he can go farther, the narrator in "Dig" realizes that perhaps it is okay not to go in after all. If water here is a representation of morbid fascination and a symbol of the inviting nature of self-destruction, then "Dig" offers slight but hopeful growth compared to "After." At the end of "Dig," the narrator, dehydrated and weak, imagines falling into a large hole in the sand that somewhat resembles the holes she used to dig as a child. In her mind, she falls deep into the earth, where "darkness waits" for her. Compare this to "After," which opens with the idea that darkness has come out of the earth. The first line and last line of this collection contain "dark" in them; it is my intention to make the stories cyclical, much like the fear and anger and violence in their pages.

In combining grit lit and magical realism, I read many stories from grit lit's mother, Flannery O'Connor, and magical realism's father, Gabriel García Márquez. Their stories, especially their ruminations on death, are everywhere in this text. The original idea for the (I don't like this word) "tone" in some of these stories, especially the earlier drafts, was inspired by Denis Johnson's *Jesus' Son*, particularly the surreal anger and passive violence of "Emergency." Much of the dialogue, especially "Sleep" and "Hug," were inspired by Salinger's supreme "A Perfect Day for Bananafish." "Sleep" and "Hug" were also heavily inspired by Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper." I studied some of the work of Cormac McCarthy; *The Road* inspired parts of "After" and "Dig," and his colossal *Blood Meridian* inspired almost every story, especially "Revival." "Revival" was also inspired by William Faulkner's *Absalom! Absalom!* and Shakespeare's *King Lear*. "Rob" was heavily inspired by John Cheever's "The Swimmer." "Dig" takes a little from Jack Kerouac, Barry Hannah, and Tim O'Brien. H.G. Wells' "Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned" also helped minor parts of some of the stories. The despair in the novels appears in large part thanks to Gwendolyn Brooks. Richard Wright helped with the anger.

Works of art I consider crucial to the spirit of these stories are listed below:

"Golden Gate Fields," Rancid, *Rancid 2000*.
"Airline to Heaven," Billy Bragg and Wilco, *Mermaid Avenue Vol. 2*, with words by Woody Guthrie.
"The Loneliness and the Scream," Frightened Rabbits, *The Winter of Mixed Drinks*.
"My Valuable Hunting Knife," Guided by Voices, *Tigerbomb*.
"Tidal Wave," Taking Back Sunday, *Tidal Wave*.
"Baba O'Riley," The Who, *Who's Next*.
Jesus' Son, Denis Johnson.
Blood Meridian, Cormac McCarthy.
The Road, Cormac McCarthy.
Absalom!, Absalom!, William Faulkner.
As I Lay Dying, William Faulkner.
Macbeth, William Shakespeare.
King Lear, William Shakespeare.
Native Son, Richard Wright.
The Stand, Stephen King.
Big Sur, Jack Kerouac.
American Psycho, Bret Easton Ellis.
Tampa, Alissa Nutting.
"A Perfect Day for Bananafish," J.D. Salinger.
"The Yellow Wallpaper," Charlotte Perkins Gilman.
"Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned," H.G. Wells.
"The Swimmer," John Cheever.
"A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings," Gabriel García Márquez.
"A Good Man Is Hard to Find," Flannery O'Connor.
"Emergency," Denis Johnson.
"Speaking of Courage," Tim O'Brien.
Akira, Katsuhiro Otomo (film and manga).
Raising Arizona, Joel Coen and Ethan Coen.
Reservoir Dogs, Quentin Tarantino.
Outrage, Beat Takeshi.
Deadwood, David Milch.
The Wire, David Simon.
The Starry Night, Vincent van Gogh.
How Mordred was Slain by Arthur, and How by Him Arthur was Hurt to the Death, Arthur Rackham.
Massacre of the Innocents, Peter Paul Rubens.

There are at least two more stories I would like to add, one of which, "Right," is mentioned in some of the other stories (people turning into furniture). It would feature a veteran of the War in Afghanistan who is slowly melding into his bed, told from the point of view of his boyfriend. Some of the inspiration here comes from the work of Garth Greenwell and Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener."

I would also like to tell a story about a ghost band of Irish horse thieves in America, told from their point of view. James Joyce and Cormac McCarthy are primary influencers here.

One story I began and almost immediately stopped, "Prophet," I plan on turning into a novel. It concerns a pastor's wife who makes up visions in order to raise money for her critically ill infant son. To her surprise, her stories, which include children with knives outside of homes and people whose limbs are disappearing, become true. She develops a fanatic following; the entire story is told as a confessional she is writing just before the mass suicide of her cult. The story is influenced by the works of Faulkner, Stephen King, and John of Patmos.

I would like to write and revise these ten or eleven short stories and hope to publish them independently and as a collection.

Part I: The End Times

After

At night, we sleep in hammocks so the dark things won't get to us.

I'm about seven feet in the air, balancing on the sturdy limb of a red oak as I help Evelyn set up her hammock. I attach one of the hammock's carabiners to a strap wrapped around the trunk of the tree and start making a knot with the strap around the head of the carabiner. Evelyn is in a tree across from me doing the same with her end of the hammock. She finishes before me and shimmies down the tree to the forest floor. The shadow of the tree stretches beside her.

The sun is red-gold and setting behind a Blue Ridge mountain. Night will fall in half an hour.

"I feel like we've been cutting it a little too close lately," she says.

"Maybe," I say. "But they haven't come out for weeks now."

"It's not worth risking."

"I suppose."

I finish my knot and climb down the tree.

"Too late for a fire now," I say.

"We shouldn't have cut it so close, Mason."

"We'll be alright in the hammocks."

Evelyn gets nervous without the fire at night. Many nights I've sat in my hammock and watched the dark things circle the flames. They are oil-black and shaped something like weasels and very, very fast. I've wondered if I could attack them with fire, if they would burn. I've been too scared to ever try.

I wipe pieces of bark off my parka and walk over to my hammock, which is stretched high between two thick pines. I climb one of the trees and carefully settle into the hammock. In it are a blanket and a tarp. I wrap the blanket around me and the tarp over it. It's late September and the rains are sudden and cold.

I hear her fidgeting in her hammock a few yards away.

"You okay?" I ask.

"I'm fine," she says. "I really miss books."

"You couldn't read them in this light anyhow."

The last red creeps under the treeline and it's night. For a few minutes, I feel panic in my stomach and on my chest as if it's lying on me. I listen for the sounds of the dark things under us, their scuttling and their long teeth gnashing. The world is quiet.

"I really don't think they're coming," I say. "You know, I could come over there if you wanted. If you're scared. We could talk."

She doesn't answer.

The next morning, I take my rod and tackle box and head to what my map of the Appalachian Trail tells me is Lake Winfield Scott. I don't know if the dark things ever took anything that wasn't human--I've never seen them take anything else--but I can say I haven't come across dog or deer since I left Suwanee. Most of the birds seem to have flown off shortly after, leaving the insects and the fish. I sit on a dock at the edge of the lake and watch the bream move in lazy schools under the pale water.

I grab a lure from the tackle box and cast it into the lake. Only a few minutes pass before one of the fish starts tugging the line. I pull the fish onto the

dock and watch it drown in air for a while. As it's still gasping, I grab it by the tail and slam it against the dock. The fish goes slack in my hand.

I toss the lure back into the lake. The sun is climbing a cloudless sky and I try not to but I start thinking of Evelyn. I imagine us together, alone at the lake, laughing at the fish and their dumb hunger.

When the dark things first came out of the ground, we tried to fight them. They rose from below like the earth was sweating them. They searched us out and devoured us and the streets were soon empty of life. We heard crying and saw fires and then those were gone and by the end of the next day the earth was quiet again.

We soon discovered they avoided water and fire and even the smallest man-made steps. And they never climbed; I guess whatever hell they spawned from, they were afraid of getting too far from it.

"Why don't they come up here for us?" I'd once asked Evelyn, as we watched them from the second story of an empty mall.

"Who knows?" she'd said. "Maybe it's just a mindless instinct. Like attacking us when we get too close. It's just their nature."

"Their nature sure seems awful."

"True. But I've seen worse."

We are camped on the trail where it runs beside the lake. Evelyn is squatting near the fire cooking the fish. Her parka is wrapped around the handle

of the pan so she can hold it. She is muscled and freckled and sweat makes her gray shirt cling to her chest.

"I would cook a hundred fish and trade them for just one Big Mac," she says.

"Let me hold the pan for you," I say.

"I don't mind."

"But I want to."

I crouch beside her and she hands me the pan. Her parka is warm and I smell her sweat mixed with the smell of the fish.

"I'm going to go find some dry wood," she says, standing. "I don't want to go two nights in a row without a fire."

"You think they're gonna come back?"

"I think if they do we should have a fire ready."

"Maybe they're gone now. Thinking everyone else is gone."

"Everyone's not gone."

"I'm just saying maybe they think that."

"There's no way it's only us now."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

She stares down at the fire. The lake sparkles behind her. I try not to think about the smell of her and my hunger and the taste of the fish.

A few of us survived because we were cowards, bunkered in apartments and on rooftops, avoiding the low ground. There was a lot of calling out and fear

when the calls went unanswered. The dark things stayed below us and we listened in terror at the sounds of their searching.

One morning I noticed the monsters were not on the streets anymore. I was hungry and scared. I joined some people wandering the roads, looking for people. Everything felt desperate. The hugging and fucking and fighting and crying were all desperate. That night, the things came out again. We didn't know they'd be back and most of us were finished off. I was stealing food out of my neighbor's high-rise when it happened or they would have finished me off, too.

The fish are crackling, telling me they're ready, when she gets back. She's breathing hard and covered in so much sweat I can see the outline of her nipples under her shirt.

"There's fire," she says, panting.

"And delicious fish above it," I say.

"No, I mean out there. There's a fire out there."

"What kind of fire? Where?"

"Somewhere beyond those mountains. I was cresting that hill there and I could see smoke. Lots of it. We should go."

"Slow going with this gear on these mountains."

"I know."

"It could be a brush fire. There was a lightning storm yesterday."

"I don't think so."

"What makes you so sure it's people?"

She looks at the forest floor. "It just could be, is all."

"Okay," I say, resting the skillet on a nearby stump. "We can head that way. But let's eat first. We'll need the energy."

She nods and pulls her thermos from her backpack and drinks. I watch her and the fire against the slick of her skin. I try to think of finding people but all I can think about is eating the fish.

I met Delilah a few days after the creatures returned. She had dark hair and dark eyes and everything about her seemed cut out of darkness. She was quiet and hungry and I had food.

"Do you know what happened?" she asked me, eating a can of Campbell's Italian-Style Wedding I had given her.

"You mean where those things came from?" I asked.

"Yes."

"No."

"Are they gone?"

"You mean the people those things took?"

"Yes."

"I don't know. I think so."

"Are you going to leave me?"

"No," I said. "Not if you don't want. You can follow me."

"Where?"

"I don't know. North. Until we find someone else."

"You think there are others?"

"I guess we'll see."

We spent our second night together on the roof of a Mattress King, listening to the sounds of the things below us. We were guessing in turn where they had come from and why they were here.

"A chemical spill," Delilah said. "It seeped into the ground and the water and grew them."

"You mean like they're mutant mole people?" I asked.

"It's not funny."

"I think they're from another country. Some country that wants to hurt us. Korea, maybe."

"Biological warfare?"

"If that's what you want to call it."

That night was a full moon and Delilah looked amazing in its light, dark and small and vulnerable. I thought about how there was no one around, possibly for many miles. I put my arm around her and pulled her to me. She didn't smile but she didn't say no, and then it happened. She didn't smile or say no in the nights after, so it kept happening.

We knew the rules by then. The dark things came out at night. They were low to the ground and they couldn't climb or swim. When they were about to appear, we could feel the earth tremble under us with their scurrying.

We found Evelyn camping in a hardware store outside of Flowery Branch. She asked to join us and we said she could. She was cute, but I decided to stick with Delilah, who never said no.

We follow the trail as it winds up a hill near the lake. After dinner we set up our hammocks. The hammocks make me think of sleeping and then I think of Evelyn. We sit with the campfire between us.

"You saw the smoke this time," Evelyn said. "We're getting closer."

"We should prepare ourselves," I say. "Mentally. In case there aren't any people there."

"Not this again," she says.

"We can't get our hopes up, is all."

"Seriously, Mason. Shut up."

"All I'm saying is maybe it really is just us now. It's been months since we've seen anything living besides fish. You and I could be all the human race has left."

"Don't sound so excited."

"I'm not excited. I'm just being realistic."

"We'll see tomorrow. I'm going to bed."

She stands and heads in the direction of her hammock.

"I hate these hammocks," I say. "I bet we could sleep on the ground now. If we wanted."

"I like the hammock."

"It'll get cold soon."

"What does that matter?"

"It'll be cold in the hammock. Alone."

She stops walking and turns to me.

"It's almost dark," she says. "Good night."

I want to sit by the fire and wait for the night to come and prove to her that it's safe. I want to show her that we can sleep near each other and that our bodies are warm. Besides, what does she have against me? I look fine and treat her fine and hell: I might be the only man alive for her. Does she think she's better than me? Bullshit. I'll sit by the fire and show her it's safe. Show her I'm not scared.

But I am scared. I get up before the last bit of sun is gone behind the mountains and walk quickly to my hammock.

Sometimes I had dreams about Evelyn and Delilah together. I asked them if they liked girls and they rolled their eyes and laughed at me.

Most evenings, Evelyn would go out to scout for places to sleep and Delilah would tell her to be careful and I'd tell Evelyn not to hurry. I'd use the time to get with Delilah. Sometimes I thought of Evelyn when I was with her.

"Do you want to go with me?" Evelyn asked Delilah one evening.

"We enjoy the alone time," I said. "No offense."

"I was asking her," Evelyn said.

"You really think she doesn't feel the same?"

"If she does, she can tell me. You can tell me if you want to go, Delilah."

"What kind of places do you go?" Delilah asked.

"You've seen them," I said. "It's the places where we end up sleeping."

"I go all kinds of places," Evelyn said. "You never know what's out there."

"Dead bodies," I said. "Cannibals. How's that sound, Delilah?"

"I've never seen a cannibal," said Evelyn.

"First time for everything."

"He's just trying to scare you."

"Quit talking like I'm not here. And quit talking to her like she doesn't want to spend time with me. You want to spend time with me, right, Delilah?"

I grabbed Delilah's wrist.

"You go out there, you'll get hurt," I said. "Trust me."

One night we passed a liquor store, its windows broken. I peeked inside the store and there at the end of a shelf was a bottle of whiskey somehow untouched. I brought it back to the ladies and told them that now we were ready for a special occasion. I was shaking so hard with excitement my fingers fumbled on the wrapper and I ended up tearing it off with my teeth. I took a long swallow and held it out for them, burping and feeling the heat of the burp through my mouth and nose.

"I don't drink," Evelyn said.

Delilah shook her head.

"Come on, what the fuck?" I said. "Delilah."

"I don't think she wants any," Evelyn said.

"She can tell me if she doesn't."

"I don't," Delilah said, staring at her shoes.

"What's that?"

Delilah looked at Evelyn.

"I don't think I want any," Delilah said.

"What are you telling her for?" I asked.

She didn't answer. They both just stared at me until I felt my ears get hot with embarrassment.

"Whatever," I said. "More for me."

I took a huge gulp to prove my point. I drank almost the whole bottle and threw up and fell asleep near the puke.

We are less than ten miles from the smoke, but with the darkness coming we don't want to risk travelling any farther. Our hammocks are stretched between trees on opposite sides of a small clearing. In the middle of the clearing, our fire struggles against the cold wind drifting from the nearby lake. The leaves on the forest floor are damp where the trees guard them from the sun and in other places the leaves crunch under our feet as we finish setting up camp.

I sit at the fire and feel the cold lake breathing against my back. Evelyn sits across the fire from me. The fire reaches a wet stick and hisses. Evelyn's face is lit by the fire in golds and reds.

"You sure you looked in the same spot as before?" I ask.

She doesn't answer.

"And no smoke this time," I say. "It could have been a brushfire. From the lightning storm."

"It wasn't," she says.

"What makes you think it wasn't?"

"Maybe they just moved camp."

"We called out for them. We lit fires so they could find us."

"It was a camp. I know it was."

"I told you there might not be anyone."

"Stop it."

"What if it is just us? What's so wrong with that?"

"Mason, shut your goddamn mouth."

I shiver at the wind coming off the lake. Evelyn's red face watches me through the flames.

"I'm not a punishment," I say. "I'm not a burden. Or a freak."

"I didn't say you were."

"Then why won't you eat next to me? Why won't you sit next to me around the fire? Why do... why do we still use those fucking hammocks?"

"Maybe I just don't want to be with you like that."

"Like what?"

"Jesus. Don't be coy, Mason."

I feel like a fool now. She's made me feel like a fool.

"I'm gonna find some more kindling," I say. "For your precious goddamn fire."

"That would be nice."

I start to leave and turn back to her.

"I'm only suggesting what's natural. If there's no one else, it's our responsibility."

Evelyn doesn't respond. I head into the forest. The wind off the lake is very cold.

The three of us were in an apartment and the night came fast the way it does after whiskey. Evelyn was making her bed on the living room couch and Delilah and I were in the bedroom. I was hot from drinking and wanted a breeze

in the room. I pulled at the window sill but it wouldn't open. I cursed at it and thought of Delilah behind me judging so I cursed at her too.

Evelyn came into the bedroom and I told her if she wanted to barge into the bedroom with me and Delilah then she could just join us in bed but first I had to get the damned window open. Evelyn asked Delilah if she wanted to sleep in the living room with her.

"Why would she wanna do that?" I asked.

"Delilah," Evelyn said.

Delilah said something low so I didn't hear her. I struggled at the window, feeling heat building inside me. The room was hot and my fingers slick with sweat so I couldn't grab hold of the sill. I pulled upwards and my fingers slipped and I bent a fingernail. I looked at the nail. It was white above the bending and then red and bleeding. The blood upset me and the room felt even hotter.

"Goddammit, motherfucker," I said.

On the nightstand by the bed was an alarm clock. I took the clock and jerked its cord from the wall and launched it over my head at the window. It crashed through the glass and a few seconds later I heard it land on the parking lot below. The night breeze came in, bringing with it the sounds of the dark things scurrying and gnashing their teeth. The cool air felt good and I forgot about the broken nail.

"Delilah," Evelyn said.

The window looked like a mouth with broken glass for teeth.

"It's okay," Delilah said.

"She said it's okay," I said.

"Are you sure?" Evelyn asked.

I looked at Evelyn. She stood at the door to the bedroom watching Delilah. The whiskey made me feel angry and brave. Evelyn was trying to take Delilah while I was drunk and I wouldn't let that happen. Delilah was mine, not hers.

"You want to watch," I said. "Fine." I started undoing my belt.

"It's okay," said Delilah. "I'm okay."

"I'm right outside," Evelyn said.

"And we're right in here," I said. "Having a grand old time."

"Good night," Evelyn said and left the room.

"Come in anytime," I said and slammed the door. Blood from my finger had dripped down my hand and I left part of a red palm print on the door.

Nightfall for at least an hour now and the dark things still haven't come. The ground is quiet. The fire is almost dead. I hear the lake now as it licks the shoreline. I think of the fish under the heaving waters.

I slide from my hammock onto the ground. My feet touch the earth and I am so afraid I can barely stand. I picture the creatures crawling over me, their teeth sinking into me, all of me, eating me alive. I wait, terrified almost to the point I think I might pass out, but the things never come. I am on the ground at night for the first time in many weeks.

I am brave. With this bravery I tell myself I never liked Evelyn. She looks nothing like Delilah. She is bulky and her skin is crowded with freckles and her hair is dirt-red and stringy like roots pulled from the ground. Delilah was slender and graceful, with dark hair and dark eyes.

But I have to admit to myself that it's been a while. And Evelyn looks pretty good now after months of hiking and eating fish. What if she and I are all that's left? There are things I love or could love about her. For example, I love her sweat. The way it lights up gold against her skin when she sits by the fire. We could sweat by the fire together. I risked walking on the ground at night to get to her. I have a responsibility. This is okay. This is okay, I think.

I look at her hammock, a shadowy bulge hanging between two trees. I walk past the dying fire to her. She's sleeping. I jump and pull hard at her hammock and she flips and comes crashing down. She lands on her head and I hear a crunch that isn't from the leaves. She lets out a low moan and I put my hand against her mouth even though there is no one is alive to hear us. I feel a warm slickness against my hand. Her nose is bleeding.

I turn her over in the leaves.

"It's just us," I say. "It's just us now."

I think of the lake pressing against the shoreline and the fish.

The sheets were tangled around me so that when Delilah got out of bed I felt the tug of her moving. I was still drunk, the beginning of a hangover forming. The pain in my finger started roaring and kept me awake. I sat up in bed and saw her standing near the broken window. I couldn't remember what I'd done the night before.

Delilah was dressing.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Go back to sleep," she said.

"Where are you going?"

"I'll be right back. Go back to sleep."

I closed my eyes, eager to believe anything that would get me away from the sick, drunk feeling. Delilah dressed and left but I couldn't get back to sleep. The sounds of the dark things scuttling outside began to swell. The room felt hot again and I kicked off the covers and the sheets, overwhelmed by heat. My throat felt raw from drinking. I stood up from the bed and made my way to the cool air drifting through the window and looked out into the night.

Delilah was running across the empty parking lot. The things were chasing her in the moonlight. They swarmed over her and pulled her down and soon there was nothing left.

We are still on the ground the next morning. I've taken the straps from one of the hammocks and tied Evelyn's wrists behind her. Her nose is purple and swollen and her eyes have dark crescents under them. She won't look at me or speak to me. I try to build a fire but my hands are shaking and I can't strike the flint right. I leave the hammocks behind and carry as much of our gear as I can while she walks on the trail ahead of me, hands bound.

We follow the trail as it climbs a hill. Cold wind sweeps off the lake. At the top of the hill, I notice a thin column of smoke bending over the treeline in the valley below.

The next morning Evelyn was leaning over me, shaking me awake. I swiped at her hands and turned away, trying not to get sick and feeling fire in one of my fingers.

"Wake up!" she yelled. "Wake up!"

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Where the fuck is Delilah?"

"I don't know," I said. "I think she left last night."

"What the fuck do you mean, she *left*?"

"I'm not sure."

"Like outside? Did you see her leave?"

"I can't remember."

"When did you last see her?"

"I can't remember. Let's look for her. I'm sure we'll find her."

My throat felt sore and sour. The pain in my finger was awful.

I got out of bed and stretched and found the canteen on the nightstand beside the bed and drank from it in long, loud gulps. I finished the canteen and screwed the lid on and looked at the ruined nail on my hand.

Evelyn checked the contents of her backpack and zipped it up and flung it over her shoulder. She glared at me. She looked afraid and disgusted and angry all at once.

"What?" I asked. "Are you going to help me look for Delilah?"

We left the apartment and didn't speak for the rest of the day.

We find a small camp of four, two men and two women. It's midday, the sun high and hiding behind the edge of a stormcloud. Before we reach the camp, I remove the strings from Evelyn's hands and whisper in her ear that I'll hurt her if she says anything. We approach the group in silence.

"There's more of us at the base of that mountain," one of the men tells us, pointing behind him.

"We're thankful," I say. "We were afraid there weren't any of us left."

One of the women walks over to us and looks at Evelyn and then at me. She tells us there's a building near the camp where we can shower. With separate facilities for men and women, she says, glancing back at Evelyn. I smile and tell Evelyn to go on ahead and that I'll be there shortly.

The lake is less than a mile from the camp. I wade into the water and watch the fish move around me. I go farther until the water is up to my knees, my waist, my chest. I hear the rumble of the approaching storm, feel the wind whip the lake. The fish move away from me until I can barely see them in the water. Then they disappear, and I swim out to follow.

Sleep

I don't sleep very well anymore.

In what my parole officer calls "the bad days," I did lots of uppers. When the uppers started fading, I'd crash. Especially with meth. I'd sleep for many hours. I could sleep thirteen hours straight, no problem. Sometimes people would try to wake me up and I would tell them I wanted to die. That's what they told me. I don't remember most of that time. I drank a lot to even the buzz. And I took pills.

One time I mixed meth and booze and Oxycontin and I couldn't move my mouth very well. Words came out slushy when I spoke. I thought this was how rock stars end up how they sound.

I wanted to be a rock star.

My mother's guest bedroom is filled with pictures. I'm posing with a Little League Slugger in one of them. I'm smiling while I hold the bat and showing some missing baby teeth. I am missing some adult teeth now, but not in the same places.

I'm in the guest bed trying to sleep. It's early morning. Sun comes through the blinds and paints my room like jail bars.

I get up to close the blinds and see a small child with a yellow cap dancing on the deck in our backyard. He is spinning and swaying in a slow circle, fists raised above him.

He stops spinning and looks at me. I wave to him. He waves back, smiling.

His smile grows wider and wider. I get scared. It's more than a human could smile, I think. So wide it distends his face. My head starts hurting. I close the blinds and leave the room.

My mother is in the kitchen making breakfast. She has osteoporosis and broke her femur a few years back. Now she uses a walker to get around. She needs an operation on her back for a vertebrae with a hairline fracture but she can't afford it. My dad's life insurance money is mostly gone, spent on my rehab.

She is frying eggs and bacon in a large skillet.

"I could do that for you," I say.

"I thought you were asleep," she says.

"Not really."

"Still having trouble sleeping?"

"For more than an hour or two, here and there. You should really let me finish those."

"It's alright."

"You shouldn't be up."

"It hurts to sit for too long."

I set the dishes on the kitchen table. Instead of a normal chair, my mother uses her wheelchair. Normal chairs hurt her back. Standing up for too long hurts her back. She says almost everything is painful.

I make some toast and we sit down and eat our breakfast. I poke at the egg yolk with my toast.

"Did you find anything about getting a job?" she asks.

"Not yet," I say. "It's only morning."

"I meant yesterday."

"I told you yesterday."

"I don't remember what you said."

"I said I didn't."

"Didn't find anything?"

"No," I say. "It's tough when you have a felony."

My mother glares at me. She hates when I bring up prison.

"President says there are more jobs than ever," she says.

"Oh yeah?"

"He says this is the best economy in history."

"He says a lot of things."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing."

"You don't believe him?"

I try to change the subject.

"I think I'm going to go on a walk," I say. "Just in the neighborhood. It's nice outside."

"Will you fill out some applications when you get back?"

"Yes. Or maybe sleep, if I can."

"Fill out those applications first."

"Would you like to come with me?" I ask. "I can push you in the wheelchair."

"I just took my morning meds."

"Well. At least one of us will be sleeping."

After breakfast I put on a thin jacket and step out of the house. In Georgia, fall is brief, but when it's here, it's wonderful. The air smells like leaves and I can feel the warm sun and the cool breeze at the same time. A few small clouds huddle together in the sky.

My mother's neighborhood is part of an old, sprawling East Cobb subdivision. The houses are small and nice and overpriced. They are all about the same size and gray. Most of the driveways are empty. Everyone's at work or driving kids to school.

I smoked my first joint in one of these houses. It was at the party of a friend of a friend. We smoked in his basement. A few girls were there. I was in eighth grade and girls were still new to me. Or my feelings for them were new. I wasn't very cool so I couldn't tell anyone how I felt about them. When I was high I felt like none of that mattered. I liked when things didn't matter because usually I was sad and cared about things too much.

I walk past many other houses. They bring back many memories. Most of the memories involve a friendships that were ruined or faded away. A month ago, when I first came back to my mother's house, I had tried to use Facebook to find these people. It was all depressing and humiliating for me. I deleted my account.

I head back to my mother's house. She lives on a cul-de-sac. Her house is sandwiched between two near-identical houses. A driveway climbs up a very low hill to the house. A small girl in a yellow dress stands near the driveway, her hands behind her. She looks about kindergarten age.

"Are you lost?" I ask her.

She tilts her head to the side like she's confused.

"Don't worry," I say. "I'm not gonna touch you. This is my house. Does your mommy or daddy live near here? Would you like some help?"

She smiles at me.

"What's your name? My name's Chris."

Her grin gets bigger.

"Do you have a brother?" I ask.

Something's wrong. Already in my mind I'm thinking *oh no oh no oh no*.

Her smile stretches freakishly wide. It's pulling her face at the sides. She moves her hands from behind her back. In one hand is a large kitchen knife. It looks like my mother's. The way she's holding it, it's like she's offering it to me. My head starts to hurt.

"Where did you get that?" I ask.

She doesn't answer.

"Put that away," I say. "Get that away from me. Please."

My headache gets worse. I close my eyes from the pain.

"I need to sleep," I tell her. "I have these headaches now. Where did you get that knife?"

I feel dizzy and I'm afraid to open my eyes. It's like I'm spinning through darkness. I sit on the ground.

After a minute, my head starts to clear. The pain gets less and less and I'm not dizzy anymore. I open my eyes. The girl is gone. My mother's knife is on the ground.

I pick it up and walk into the house. My mother is in her wheelchair watching the news in the living room. She's high from the pain meds. I startle her when I enter the room.

I show her the knife. "Did you lose this?" I say.

"Lose what?" she asks.

"This knife."

"No. I don't think so."

"When's the last time you used it?"

"Why? What's wrong?"

"There was a girl," I say. "A small child. She was standing on the street near our driveway. She was holding this knife."

"Where did she get it?"

"How would I know?"

"Is that my knife?" Her eyes are almost closed.

I go to the kitchen and see if my mother's knife is missing from the knife block. The slot is empty. I clean the knife in the kitchen sink and put it away.

A few days later, I'm sitting at the computer in my mother's den, looking at applications online I'm supposed to fill. They're mostly cashier jobs and cleaning jobs. One application is for a theme park a few miles away. All of the forms ask if I've ever been convicted of a felony. If I answer yes, I'm supposed to tell them which felonies.

Burglary.

Armed robbery.

Possession of a Schedule I narcotic.

When my buddy Drew and I walked out of the gas station with our guns, sweating in our ski masks in the summer, and we saw the officer getting gas pull his piece and tell us to place our weapons on the ground and put our hands in the air, Drew turned to me and said:

"Well. Guess we'll never be President."

I send the applications and check on my mother. She is still in the wheelchair in front of the news. She's snoring. I go back to the computer and watch porn and think of my parole officer who's a pretty woman my age. I finish with the porn and wash my hands. I'm hungry.

In the kitchen, I open the fridge and find there aren't many options in the way of lunch. I figure I'll head to the store. I lost my ID but my mother can't drive on medicine. When I tried to explain to the people in charge of my release that my mother is high on pain pills all the time and my father is dead, they told me I shouldn't have tried to rob the gas station.

I wake up my mother.

"I'm going to the store for some food," I say.

"Where?"

"The grocery store. Kroger's."

"Do we need food?"

"Yes."

"Are we out?"

"Yes. There's hardly anything in the fridge. Anything you want me to get?"

"What are you getting?"

"I'm thinking chicken tenders."

"I'm not hungry, I don't think."

"You need to eat. I'll get you some tenders."

I grab the keys to my mother's old Integra and go to the garage. I open the garage door and on the other side are the boy and girl with the wide smiles. They are dancing in slow circles on the driveway with their arms raised.

My head hurts again. The pain pushes against the backs of my eyeballs and I feel sick.

"Go away," I tell them. "Please."

They stop dancing and watch me as I sit on the floor of the garage. They're starting to smile. I close my eyes.

"No. I don't want you here. Goddammit. Please go away. Please?"

The dizziness turns into a warm feeling of tiredness. Like sleep is a pool of warm water God's dipping me in.

I lean my head back to sleep and feel my head on the back of a seat. I think maybe I'm in a chair. The air is very warm and I'm sweating.

I open my eyes and realize I'm in the Integra with the windows down. The garage door is still closed and the car is running. I turn the car off and step out, stumbling a little.

I just need to sleep, I tell myself. I just need to sleep.

My father killed himself in this garage. He retired after thirty-five years working at the post office and bought a workbench for the garage. He started spending more and more time at the workbench until my mother said she only really saw him when they were eating or when he went to bed. He went to bed later and later but always woke up around seven in the morning to eat breakfast.

Then he'd head to the garage. He would start drinking around five in the afternoon and be drunk by eight. When he was drunk he would tell my mother that everyone was out to get him. Life itself wanted to kill him, he said. He bought a portable television for camping and set it on the workbench and brought a chair from the kitchen table and watched sports. He didn't have a special team or sport and watched whatever was on. My mother would hear him yelling at the television when he was drunk. He was watching the Master's when he broke a lightbulb and traced the glass up his wrists.

Days go by. I'm still having trouble with sleep. Sometimes when I look out the window of my room I can see the children watching me. They start to smile and my head begins to ache. I make myself look away.

One morning, I'm watching a talk show with my mother and notice she's nodded off in the wheelchair. Her chin rests on her chest and she's snoring softly. I wonder if the children are outside. I call my ex-girlfriend on the house phone. She doesn't usually answer my calls, but this time she does.

"Hello?"

"Tracy."

"Chris?"

"Yes. I miss your voice."

"Is everything okay?"

"I'm great, actually."

"That's good," she says. "Listen. I'm not trying to sound like a bitch--"

"Okay, I know--"

"--but seriously I told you I don't want to talk anymore."

"I remember what you said--"

"You need to respect that."

"Remember what happened with my father?"

I hear Tracy sigh and I think she's going to hang up on me.

"Are you sure everything's okay?" she says.

"No," I say. "Maybe not. I've been thinking about how my dad was his last few months. Staying in the garage. He got weird at the end, there, didn't he?"

"Did something happen? Did you do something?"

"I just... I can't sleep. He didn't sleep either."

"I'm sorry," she says. "But you can't do this."

"Do what?"

"Call me to tell me you can't sleep. I care about you. But you can't call me."

"I'm scared."

"Then find someone."

"Listen, I'm sorry."

"It hurts to talk to you, Chris."

"I'm sorry," I say. "I really am. You know I really am sorry for everything."

"I know. I'm not doing this again with you."

"Please, just talk with me a little."

"Talk? You broke my fucking heart."

"Jesus, Trace, don't you understand I'm really scared?"

"There are therapists. Counselors. NA groups."

"I need someone who knows who I am."

"Your needs." She takes a long breath. "I don't care about your needs anymore, Chris. I can't. I'm sorry."

"You don't mean that."

"I have to go."

"I still love you. Tell me you don't mean that."

"Goodbye," she says. "Be safe, please."

The line clicks.

I hang up the phone. My mother is drooling on her chin in her sleep. Women are laughing and screaming on the television. I go to the nearest window and look outside. The children are dancing in the yard. They look very happy.

I find my mother's pain meds in her bathroom and take them and finally sleep. When I wake up, I think I'm somewhere new. I feel confused but not afraid. A few times I blacked out at house parties and woke up in a room in the house I'd never seen before and I didn't know where I was but I knew I was safe. It feels like that.

I realize I'm in my mother's yard. Outside the window to the living room. My mother's in her wheelchair dressed in black. She's watching the television. It's an old home movie. I'm three or four years old in the video, squealing as I run into the arms of my father.

My mother shifts in her wheelchair and sees me outside the window. I can tell she's been crying. I smile at her. I reach my small hands at the sky and start to dance.

Rob

He'd seemed okay the night before, bouncing on his stool excitedly as he explained the terms of his sabbatical: what it meant and how long it lasted and what you had to do to get one. We told him we were excited and he bought us shots to celebrate. Soon we were all really drinking.

That night before the leg, we crowded him like piglets as he told us more about the conditions of the sabbatical. He smiled and flapped his sweaty arms excitedly as he talked. It was like a performance.

"Sometimes it's only for a semester," he said. "But you can apply for a year. That's what I got. Can you imagine? A whole year of getting paid to do nothing but relish life and recount your adventures."

"What are you gonna do?" asked Arlo.

"I have colleagues in Kilkenny," Rob said. "Such beautiful architecture and geography, I've been told. And I would just love love love to see the Nore. Maybe storm a castle or two while I'm there." He winked at me.

I raised my empty whiskey at him--storming castles, sure thing--and hoped he would notice I needed another. Unfortunately, he had already turned back to Arlo and Lynda and the others around him. He was reciting some jingle about two cats fighting. LaRhonda poured me a drink and I frowned because I knew I'd have to pay for it. Rob spotted her and started flailing his arms for her attention, knocking over Arlo's pitcher. Both men stood up quick as the beer and foam fell on them.

"Ah, dammit," Rob said. "I am so sorry. So, so sorry. Did it get on you? It didn't, did it?"

"Nah, I cleared it," Arlo said. He watched the beer the way a guy might watch his house burn down.

"LaRhonda," Rob said. "Love, could we?" He gestured at the spilled beer. LaRhonda returned with a new pitcher. She placed it near Arlo. Rob smiled at her through the tap handles.

"It's like I'm looking through the bars of a zoo," he said.

"Quit putting napkins on it," said LaRhonda. "You're just making it worse."

Later, the lights became very bright. The music cut out suddenly and then we could hear and see each other too well.

"I'll give you twenty dollars for one more," Rob said.

"Register's closed, babe," LaRhonda said.

"I'll add it to the tip, then," Rob said. "I'm celebrating. I'm gonna be on sabbatical. LaRhonda. LaRhonda. It's a party. LaRhonda."

LaRhonda ignored him and counted her register.

Rob looked at me and rolled his eyes. I shrugged like, What can you do? He laughed and stood up from his stool, leaning a little on the bar for support. He started making his way to the doors at the front of the bar, his feet barely lifting off the ground as he moved.

I was the last to step outside. The night was warm and open, like a mouth ready to swallow us. Lynda was cackling at some joke while Arlo nodded his head and lit a cigarette. Rob was taking a careful step off the curb onto the asphalt of

the parking lot, using the stem of the handicap sign for balance. Next to us, Canton Road stretched gray and flat into dark hills. I felt alive against the dead world, hearing us tell jokes and laugh and the click of the door locking behind us.

Arlo was drooping like an old scarecrow next to me at the bar. One of the old lamps above us was out and a shadow was splotched across part of the bar top. Arlo noticed me and raised the can of High Life he was drinking. LaRhonda came over and handed me my drink and I asked Arlo who died.

"Rob called the bar," he said. "Seems he's lost a leg. Sends us his best."

"Well, maybe he'll find it," I said.

"Yeah."

Lynda showed up and we told her what had happened with Rob.

"What a shame," she said.

We all nodded. One of us decided to get a round in Rob's honor. We reasoned it's what he would have wanted. Others joined us. Someone mentioned how Rob would have kept buying us shots in times of trouble. More shots were bought.

I turned to say something to Arlo but Arlo wasn't there. Someone else sat on the stool where he'd been. He was lanky and his face sagged in places that made it look like he was melting. He knew about Rob.

"Tell him he needs to drink more water," he said.

"Have we met?" I asked him.

"Trust me," he said. "I knew a guy, same thing happened to him. He started drinking water, had like, five glasses a day or whatever, and then his leg came back. But it wasn't his leg. It was his arm."

"Water, yeah," I said.

I turned to Lynda to ask her about the water idea and saw her flirting with some guy. I thought he looked like a faggot. I said something to Lynda, I don't remember what exactly. I woke up the next morning with one side of my jaw feeling rusty.

The next week, Rob came hobbling in, smiling his big sweaty smile at us. He was missing everything from the knee down on the left leg. He came to sit next to me at the bar and I clapped him on the back, catching him off balance.

"I suppose I'm not used to life sans leg just yet," he said.

"Maybe a drink will help," I said.

Rob laughed and called for LaRhonda. Lynda and Arlo and the others overheard him and we all gathered around him. Shots were laid out and divvied.

We cheered to Rob's health. Rob smiled and drank, the sweat already gathering under his arms. The place started to empty until only regulars were left. I got up to use the bathroom and tripped on the leg of my stool. I stumbled a little, smacking the bar loudly as I grabbed it for support.

"Careful, there," Rob said. "I only brought the single pair of crutches." He laughed.

When I came back from the bathroom, Rob looked spent, like something cold or wilted.

"He left me," Rob said. "We were together for almost three years."

I didn't want to talk about that, so I changed the subject.

"It'll come back," I said. "The leg. I've heard it's happened before."

"I wonder where it is," he said.

"I don't know," I said. "Don't suppose it's getting too far without the rest of you."

"I hope it's up his ass, where it belongs," Rob said. "LaRhonda. Another, would you? I hope it's wiggling its toes against his sternum. He'd probably enjoy it, the kinky fuck."

LaRhonda placed our shots between us.

"My ex is a fucking prissy shit," he said.

Just like that, out loud, to me. But the shots were free.

Rob got handy with the crutches. After a couple weeks it was almost like he'd never lost a leg in the first place.

Arlo pulled me aside when I walked into the bar.

"It's the other leg now," he said.

I watched LaRhonda start her shift at the register.

"Damn," I said.

The man with the melted face was there.

"You should tell your friend to drink more water," he said.

We all bought a shot and toasted to Rob.

"You'll have to build a ramp," a woman said. I realized it was Lynda. She was trying to avoid me.

"We have one in the back," LaRhonda said.

"I thought that was just a fire door," Lynda said.

"Lynda," I said.

"The alarm hasn't worked in years," LaRhonda said.

"How come you never told us?" Lynda said.

"Lynda," I said, louder.

"You all use the doors just fine," LaRhonda said.

Arlo came and said something to Lynda, deep into her neck. I couldn't hear it over the music. She laughed, shoulders bobbing like a cartoon. They went to the pool tables on the other side of the bar and I felt a cooling inside me. Like something cold and empty had suddenly expanded inside my body. Cold to the point of numbness and invisible as night water.

For a second, I couldn't find my drink on the bar. Sometimes LaRhonda takes them when she thinks I've had enough. I found it hiding in an island of shadow under the bulb that had gone out.

Arlo looked Rob over with only a little discomfort. "Can you do any tricks yet?" he asked.

Rob smiled and rubbed his palms on the tops of the wheels. We were all congregated around him.

"I'm afraid I've yet to master the thing," he said.

Both Rob's legs now ended above the knees. The rest of him seemed fine, unaffected. He still glistened and laughed.

"You can park wherever you want," Arlo said.

"It's not all bad," Rob said.

"You know what would make you feel better?" I said. "A drink."

He laughed and gave me that "storm the castles" wink.

"LaRhonda," he said.

LaRhonda came over.

"You should know," she said, "I don't think he's coming back."

"Who?" I asked.

"It was his hands this time," the man with the sagging face said. "Maybe more than that."

"We met?" I asked.

He leaned close, his hounddog face turned up at me.

"Should have drank more water," he said.

"Do you know Arlo?" I asked him.

The man shook his drooping face and settled back onto his stool. I watched him drink the beer in steady, hungry gulps. I grew thirsty watching him.

"Want to get a pitcher?" I asked him.

"Sure," he said. "But I don't have a tab."

LaRhonda came over and I waited to see if the man would order a pitcher but he didn't. I noticed Arlo and Lynda standing near the jukebox, dancing under the red glow of a Budweiser sign, his arm around her waist in a way that made my stomach flat. I thought I might go ahead and buy a beer. I thought of something else and walked over to the jukebox.

"That's a nice song," I said. "A mighty nice one."

"I need to use the restroom," Lynda said.

"Now hold on," I said. "I ain't starting nothing. I have an idea. About Rob."

"Go on," Arlo said.

"Well," I said, "He ain't here, on account of his missing parts. Probably all cooped up right now wishing he could be with us."

"Yeah," said Arlo.

"Smart man like that needs people around him," I said. "Like, for stimulation."

Arlo and Lynda looked at each other.

"We should pay him a visit," I said. "Try to cheer him up a little. I've given him a ride a few times. He's right off 41. We should stop by."

"And stimulate him," Lynda said.

"Well?" I said.

"I think that's fine," Arlo said.

"Sure," Lynda said.

"We should bring him something to drink," I said. "I'll drive. Think y'all could pick up something on the way?"

"Sure," Lynda said again.

A woman answered the door. I thought maybe I had the wrong place. The houses in Rob's neighborhood looked all the same to me: little white boxes crowded together like teeth. I'd only been to Rob's house a few times before, when he was too drunk to find the wheel. It had been late then, and very dark.

The woman looked at us and then at the bottle of Maker's Arlo was holding.

"Is Rob here?" I asked.

"Are you friends of his?"

"Yes."

"From the college?"

"No, ma'am."

Rob shouted from inside the house. "Callie, is it for me?"

"It sure is," she called back. She smiled and gestured for us to come inside.

Rob was missing a lot. His arms were gone all the way up to his shoulders, and the rest of the legs were gone too. Under the sheets of the bed, the small island of his body rose and fell.

"Hey, Rob," Lynda said. She wiped back the hair matted to his forehead.

Arlo presented the bottle of Makers.

"Hey," he said.

"You came bearing gifts," Rob said. "No wonder Callie sounded so terse."

"We don't have glasses," Arlo said.

"Well you can't borrow mine, they're prescription," Rob said, winking.

"Would you mind if we drank from the bottle? The glasses do me no difference now anyways."

"Of course," said Lynda, taking the Maker's from Arlo. She opened it and gently lowered it to Rob's mouth. He drank and then we drank as well.

One of the faculty came into the bar and told us. He told LaRhonda and she told the rest of us. Rob was gone. His sister had posted something on Facebook about it.

Lynda and Arlo hugged each other and LaRhonda went back to feeding the register. I suggested the bar should spread a round in Rob's honor. LaRhonda looked at me sour and then left and got some Old Crow. She poured me a long drink on the rocks and slid it to me.

"Not gonna do a round," she said. "But you can have this one on the house."

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Nothing," she said. "That one's on Rob."

I drank and ordered another. I showed LaRhonda I had a little money. I kept ordering and drinking.

I took a break from drinking. The rocks glass felt sweaty in my hand. I watched the ice melt into the whiskey, the light trapped in the cubes dwindling and snuffing out as the ice melted. The ice melted completely and there was no light in the glass.

I looked around. I couldn't find Arlo or Lynda or the man with the drooping face. LaRhonda wasn't there. I looked and found my drink near where the lamp went out. I reached for it, my hand disappearing in the shadow under the empty bulb.

Hug

I like the way people look at me when I get out of the pool. My body is incredible, very fit and gently sun-kissed. I have six tattoos: a chest piece with a clover in the shape of a heart, a full sleeve of swirling galaxies and constellations covering one arm, a cartoonish sun on the shoulder of my other arm, lyrics to a Cure song on one side of my ribs, a labyrinth on my left shoulder blade, and a knife on my inner-right thigh, its hilt poking from under my trunks suggestively.

As I step out of the pool, I look down the front of my body, admiring. Sometimes I stare in the mirror after working out and lift my shirt to watch the beads of sweat travel between my pecs and roll slowly over my abs and down the cut of my hip flexors into the trimmed patch of my bush under my shorts. I think of all the women chasing my sweat with their tongues and I get hard.

The only people at the pool besides me and my girlfriend are a young Hispanic family. The mother is struggling not to watch me as the pool water runs down my body. I slide a hand through my hair in a way that shows off my tricep and the constellation splashed across it. I have fantastic hair.

My girlfriend is sunbathing in a reclined pool chair. She looks pretty good, cute in a friendly, approachable way. She's a little on the heavy side. I tell myself that I don't mind how her cheeks crowd the bottoms of her navy-blue swimsuit or that her tits are starting to sag from the extra weight she's gained this year. She has only one tattoo, a peace sign on her inner wrist. More than one woman, drunk at an art exhibit featuring my work, has asked me what she has that they

don't. Everyone assumes I really love her because they know I could do better. I stay with her because she makes me look more attractive to other women.

Though her eyes are obscured by horn-rimmed sunglasses, I know she is asleep because she is snoring. I stand over her and shake water out of my hair onto her. She shrieks.

"Dammit, Todd," she says.

"Oh, I'm sorry, were you asleep?" I say.

"You know I was."

"You love me."

"Shut up."

"Maybe I should've done something else to wake you up. Something like this morning."

"Oh my God, stop." She giggles.

"What?"

"Put that hand away."

"What?"

"There's people here."

"So?"

"A family."

"You love it."

"We can't right here."

I sit on the pool chair next to her and pull a bottle of beer from the cooler between us.

"Maybe we could go back to my place after this," she says.

"I'm busy," I say.

"Working on another installation?"

"I can't work on an installation. It's not an installation until it's done and someone installs it somewhere."

"What's it about?"

"It doesn't matter."

"Do you think I won't get it?"

"I think it doesn't matter."

"Do you think people won't like it?"

"They'll see my name on it and they'll like it."

"Well listen to you."

"I told you it doesn't matter."

"I didn't mean--"

"Don't worry about it."

I lean back in the chair, placing the bottle on my lap so that when the mother looks at me it makes her think of my cock.

I notice a woman standing in the pool, watching me. She is gaunt and lanky and sad. The water is level to her naked chest. Her skin is grayish-white. Dark, stringy hair hangs limp around her face.

The woman is mouthing something to me but I can't hear her. She raises her arms out of the water, spread to each side. The arms start to bend.

And bend and bend...

My girlfriend is calling my name. I make myself look away from the pool, to her.

"You're being weird," she says.

"Let's go home," I say.

The following Saturday is hot, even for Atlanta in summer. I'm on my stomach on the pool recliner, watching my sweat fall through the straps and form a puddle in my shadow. I turn onto my back. I think of the color of my skin, evenly tanned and smooth, warm from the sun, warm against cool skin, under cool white sheets in my bed.

I think of Stacy.

Stacy and Derrick are sitting at a nearby table, shading under a wide blue umbrella. A cooler of beer is between them on the table. Derrick is in a white t-shirt with the sleeves cut off and something about dolphins written on the chest. He has cargo shorts and brown flip-flops. Very average looking.

Stacy is wearing a green and hot-pink bikini that barely covers her good parts. She looks like she's watermelon-flavored. I imagine licking her and tasting watermelon. She has soft brown eyes and brown hair and every part of her is a warm, enticing brown, a luscious deep brown that makes the wild colors of her bikini explode against her skin. She has a few tattoos, all of them invitations: two stars near the dimples of her lower back, two angel wings riding her hip flexors, a trail of stars rounding the curve of her right breast, and a mermaid that splashes up her side. Her tan is very even and manicured and extends even to the small places hiding under the bikini. I know this because Stacy and I have hooked up a few times when I were drunk and feeling lonely.

Stacy tells me she feels alone all the time. I tell her beautiful people like us should never feel that way. She thinks the tragedy of loneliness is sexy, which is good for me because I am very horny when I'm depressed. Sometimes she and I get drunk and have sex in places that lack any intimacy so we won't confuse our loneliness with feelings of connection. Parking garages and empty high schools and closed pools.

I think Derrick knows she isn't faithful to him. He puts up with her anyway because she still sleeps with him when she's drunk.

She is standing up to grab a beer from the cooler.

"Can you grab me one as well?" I ask.

"You can get up here and get one yourself," she says.

"But I'm so comfy." I stretch my arms over my head, watching her study my pecs and triceps.

"Come get your own beer like a big boy," she says.

"What makes you think I'm so big?"

"Will you get me one too, Todd?" my girlfriend asks. She is in the recliner next to mine, lying on her stomach over a towel. Her thighs and stomach below the towel ripple in the straps of the recliner.

"Of course, baby," I say.

I stand and skip playfully on the hot concrete over to the shade of the umbrella.

"Anymore IPAs?" I ask.

"Should be a few left," Stacy says.

"She really likes IPAs."

"That's cute you know what she likes."

"Why wouldn't I? She's my girl."

"Derrick doesn't have a clue," Stacy says.

"That's not fair," Derrick says. "You don't have a favorite."

"It's apple cider, isn't it?" I say. "But only when there's no red wine."

Last week, Stacy and I drank red wine and fucked on the top floor of her complex's parking deck.

"I do love a good cabernet," Stacy says.

"Are there any IPAs left?" my girlfriend calls from her chair.

"I was just checking for one," I say.

"You never told me you like apple cider," Derrick says.

"I always drink it," Stacy says.

"Then why didn't we bring any in the cooler?"

"Because you bought the alcohol."

"You were right there."

"Excuse me," I say. "Big boy's gotta bring his lady her beverage."

Derrick and Stacy continue their squabble. I leave with two IPAs, stopping a few yards from them to pretend to brush something off my shin. I imagine Stacy's eyes on my ass as I bend. I ignore the burn of the concrete on the soles of my feet. I do 150 squats a day just for these opportunities.

I reach my girlfriend and take one of the beers and touch the side of it to the fat under her ribs.

"For fuck's sake, Todd," she says.

"I found you the coldest IPA," I say.

"That's not funny."

"A little bit, it is."

She sits up, scowling. She grabs one of the beers from me.

"You look like you've been lightly whipped," I say.

"What?"

"Imprints. All over your stomach."

"Whatever."

"Like a weird pink zebra."

"Fuck you."

"I'm kidding."

"I'm so fat now."

"You're not fat."

"I am. Look at this shit." She squeezes some of the fat of her stomach.

"I think you're beautiful."

"Beautiful and fat."

"Are you saying I have bad taste?"

"Oh my God, shut up."

"Because I would find that highly offensive."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. That you think you look so awful when I'm over here imagining taking you to those pool steps and spreading you and fucking you in front of everyone."

"How many of these have you had?"

"Listening to the pool waves slap against us while I slid in and out."

"Todd!"

"While I fucked you."

"You are insane, you know."

"You don't like it?"

"We should hang out more. I'm free tonight."

"I'm really busy."

There is a body at the bottom of the pool at the deep end.

"Why do you have to be so busy?" she asks.

"I don't have to be," I say, standing up slowly. "I like making art."

"Are all geniuses this frustrating?"

"Only the successful ones."

I need to swim to that body. I should be scared but I'm not. I'm not scared.

I think I feel love.

"What are you looking at?" she asks.

"I'm gonna swim."

"What about your beer?"

"I'm good."

"Todd? Babe, are you okay? Are you... would you like some water?"

I walk near pool at the deep end. The body stirs.

"I'm okay," I say.

"Is something down there?" Derrick calls from the table.

The body looks up at me. It is the woman with the bending arms. She sees me.

"Todd and I would get glow sticks," Derrick says to Stacy. "And we would get drunk and throw them in the pool and race to get them."

"Todd?" My girlfriend sounds nervous now.

"I would usually get them," Derrick says. "Todd's wasn't as fast as me back then."

The woman at the bottom of the pool starts to spread her arms. Like she wants to hug me. Her lips are moving but I don't hear anything.

"I'm fine," I say.

"Are you getting in the pool?" my girlfriend asks. "I don't want your other beer."

"Too many cigarettes back then," Derrick says. "He smoked like a forest fire."

The woman at the bottom of the pool extends her arms. They are long and thin. They seem to stretch even longer. Then they start to bend.

"It's going to get warm, though," my girlfriend says.

"It was gross," Derrick says.

And bend and bend.

"So what?" Stacy says. "I smoke sometimes."

"I'm putting it under your chair," my girlfriend says.

"Yeah," Derrick says. "Like at parties maybe."

And bend and bend.

"You stand there all you want," Stacy says to me.

"Whatever," my girlfriend says.

"But not like him," Derrick says.

And bend and bend and bend.

She looks so sad and alone down there. I want to help her but I can't. Not yet. I walk over to my chair and sit down.

"What was that all about?" my girlfriend asks.

"Just kidding," I say, and drink my beer.

All week a steady rain has kept us from the pools. On Saturday the rain moves on and leaves behind a cold that thickens once the sun goes down.

A friend of mine named Rory is hosting a pool party at his apartment complex. It is a large, located in a nice area of midtown where old money and visiting money usually stay. Rory is a corporate lawyer who represents successful artists like me. I like him because he is gay and wants to fuck me. He is overweight and has spiky hair and a chinstrap beard. He looks like the frontman of a nineties band. He wears suits with gaudy colors to distract from his weight or perhaps add an eccentricity to it. Even now beside the pool he is wearing a suit.

I am not wearing a suit because I have a body that people like to see and I like when they see it. I convinced my girlfriend to wear her navy-blue swimsuit even though she says it is too cold to swim. I think really she is nervous because she has gained weight and she knows there will be a lot of people at this party including successful people who spend their time looking beautiful. She wants to look beautiful with me and doesn't think she can do that in the swimsuit.

"You are always beautiful to me," I said when we were at her apartment that evening.

"That's not the point," she said.

“Everyone else will think you’re beautiful too.”

“Not like this they won’t.” She was in her panties and a shirt that ended at her panty-line. Her gut rolled slightly over the top of her panties.

“I see nothing but intense sexuality. You’re like a magnet.”

“Oh, please.”

“Seriously. Look. I’m actually a little hard already.”

“You’re always hard.”

“I’ve been called worse. Get the bathing suit. The two piece. Then we can go swimming.”

“I am not swimming.”

“Oh come on.”

“They’ll think I’m a whale. They’ll try to harpoon me.”

“Not if I harpoon you first.”

“Put that away, Todd.”

“I’m helpless,” I said. “This is biology. I can’t fight nature.”

“You’re ridiculous. Emphasis on the ‘dic.’”

Now she is wearing the navy-blue swimsuit under a shirt and some cut-off jeans. I want her to take off her outer clothes so people can see her and me next to her.

“Let’s swim,” I say.

“Not yet,” she says.

“Come on.”

“No one else is swimming.”

“I’m a trailblazer, remember? Let’s blaze some trails.”

Rory comes over. Even though it's cold for summer, Rory is sweating from from being fat in a suit.

"Someone say 'blaze'?" he asks.

"You're a real character," I say.

"Hi," my girlfriend says.

"You remember my girlfriend?"

"Sure," he says. Then to me: "Seriously, you want to?"

"What's that?" I say.

"Blaze, baby."

"Don't say 'baby.'"

"Baby baby baby."

"Rory thinks he's being naughty," I tell my girlfriend.

"Rory knows it," Rory says. "Follow me. And sorry. Only big righteous dicks allowed."

I turn to my girlfriend.

"Go," she says.

I follow Rory to a corner of the pool where a small crowd are huddled around a table. On the table are some small mirrors and plastic cards. Someone is chopping a card on the table hard enough for the table to rattle.

"I don't snort," I say. Snorting can ruin your nose. I have a fantastic nose. A "ski-slope" nose, my girlfriend says.

"Oh, fuck that late-nineties Guy Ritchie bullshit," Rory says. He pulls a cellophane baggie from his inside jacket pocket. In the bag are four or five blue pills. "I have something that will make your dick hard for a month."

“You would like that, wouldn’t you, Rory?”

“Stop teasing.”

“I’m sorry. Can I have one?”

"You have to answer me something first."

"Okay."

“When is the last time you jerked it?”

“Rory.”

“Now, now. Pay the toll. Or you get nothing.”

The last time was right after working out, as I waited for the shower to warm up. I make up a better story for Rory.

“I was laying in bed. My girlfriend was gone. I saw someone working out in the apartment across the street from mine. He didn’t have a shirt on.”

“He?”

“I’m just trying to be honest.”

“Please continue.”

“So I’m watching him and I can barely see him but I notice he’s shining with sweat.”

“What was he doing?”

“What do you mean?”

“The exercise. What was it?”

“It was pull-ups. He had a pull-up bar. He was covered in sweat. And he was huge. Dark skin. Long dark hair. I imagined I was behind him.”

“You did not.”

“I did. In my room, on my bed. On all fours. I had a handful of his hair and I was pulling. I started playing with myself. I was already very hard. I could feel myself throbbing in my hand. I was hot and red. Very red at the tip.”

“Jesus, Todd.”

“I kept thinking about him and putting myself inside him. I have lube—”

“What kind?”

“Lavender. A deep dark purple smell.”

“A purple smell,” Rory says. “What an artist.”

“And I used it and imagined I could fit the fatness of myself inside him. Even though he was so tight.”

“Fuck, just take the pills. I can’t stand anymore.”

“You don’t want to hear the rest?”

“I can’t.”

“You don’t want to hear about how I came all over myself? Warm and sticky? Loads of it slung across my abs, my chest.”

“Take the pill.” Rory shoves one at me.

“That was a good story. I deserve another.”

“Trust me, you can’t handle another.”

“Trust me, if you want to hear the next chapter, ever, you’ll give me another.”

“Fuck you,” Rory says, giving me a second pill. “Don’t take them at the same time is all.”

“I’m going to find my girlfriend. You’re a sweetheart. Kisses.”

I imagine Rory is hard. The thought of his desire for me makes me a little hard as well. I head back to my girlfriend, who is on her phone trying not to look like she doesn't really know anyone. She is holding a glass of red wine.

"Can I see that?" I ask her.

She hands me the glass and I take the two pills.

"What were those?" she asks.

"Advil," I say.

"Don't joke with me."

"Rory gave them to me. I'm sure they're fine."

"You don't know what they are."

"I'm going to find a glass. Where did you get that one?"

"There are some bottles on a table over there."

"I'll be right back."

I spend the next hour drinking wine and talking about my paintings with people at the party. They tell me they love them. I tell them my paintings are nothing but pieces of my soul stretched on canvas. They like that. They tell me they understand. I ask them what they like most about my work. They tell me they love the honesty, or the palette, or the pain. I ask them what they don't like. Oh, nothing, they say. It is all wonderful.

The wine is flushing my face. I think the pills are kicking in. They are spreading a sunniness and a light and a heat that spreads out from my stomach and through my body. My limbs are warm and rubbery. I feel like something that would melt on a hot afternoon.

I notice the woman standing at the bottom of the pool. Her hair floats around her head like spider webs. Her arms are outstretched. She is watching me, mouthing words I cannot hear. I think she wants to hug me.

I walk closer to the pool.

Her arms extend further from her body. As if she is being pulled apart. Her arms are impossibly long now, each more than the length of her body. They are floating. They start to bend.

She is so sad alone down there. I want to hug her.

I fall into the pool.

Instantly, she starts to swim to me, moving her body like a shark. Her arms are still extended. Ready to wrap themselves around me. Her mouth moves rapidly. I still cannot hear her. But she is getting closer and when she reaches me I will hear and she will

bend and bend and bend and bend

Arms are around me but they are not hers. There are other bodies suddenly in the pool with me. They are tugging at me.

I'm pulled out of the water and realize I've not been breathing and I start to gasp for air. People are talking in low voices around me. A few men I don't know stand around me, soaked. One of them crouches over me.

"Are you okay, sir? Can you hear me? Did you take anything?"

"I'm fine," I say. I start coughing.

"Todd!" my girlfriend screams. She runs to me, kneeling beside me.

"I'm okay," I say. "Jesus."

"Did you take anything?" says the man.

“Fuck you. I was just going for a swim.”

“You were floating in the pool,” my girlfriend says.

“No, I wasn’t.”

“We called for you.”

“I was underwater. I couldn’t hear you.”

“What the fuck happened.”

“Fuck it.” I start coughing again.

I tell myself this will look good later. Tortured artist trying to drown himself. Drugs were involved. His soul is fractured. The value of my work will increase.

“Let’s go,” I tell my girlfriend.

It's night again. A few nights later.

Every time I sleep I dream about the woman in the pool. I am deep in the water, deeper than I’ve ever been. She is there with her mournful eyes and her long arms bending like tendrils to me.

I often wake up feeling her arms around me, cold and loving.

One night, I decide to meet with her. I drink a bottle of cabernet sauvignon and bring another with me to the pool in my apartment complex. I stand near the pool and finish the wine.

She is there at the bottom of the deep end, waiting. Her arms are long enough for her hands to touch each side of the pool. Her face is turned up, watching me.

I step to the edge of the pool. Her eyes are filled with sadness, loneliness.
She is trying to tell me something. I have to hear her.

I drop into the pool. Once again, she glides through the water to me.
Swimming with her arms open wide. No one to pull me away from her this time.
Her mouth moving as she approaches me.

She is right in front of me and I can hear her.

*“I love you I want to hug you they don’t love you they don’t know you I
love you you are not alone I want to hug you they don’t love you I love you I
want to hug you you are not alone they will leave you I will love you forever I
love you forever hug me I love you forever I want to hug you I will forever
forever forever hug me.”*

I’m crying. I’m drowning but I don’t know I don’t feel anything I don’t
care.

“I will comfort you,” she says. Her arms bend as they wrap around me.
And bend and bend and bend.

Revival

The wound in the old man's side is starting to smell. The stench fills the bunker. His shirt is damp and sticks where it rests over the bandages. I cannot eat my can of pork and beans because of the smell. The old man does not eat either. Instead, he continues his story.

A Chinese restaurant, of all places. One of the usual names, "Golden Something" or "Something Dragon." Horror movie lighting, plastic tables, everything sticky. There's a cooler they keep in one corner with Coke and Sprite and bottled water. Advertising sweet tea, but they ran out. We order our food and I tell Riley to grab me a Coke. He comes back holding two cans that look like aliens made them.

I say, "What the hell is that?"

He says, "It's good. You'll like it."

I say, "I asked for a Coke."

He says, "Just try it."

The can looks like it's trying hard to be something from the future. All white, with **Revival** printed in large gold letters. Wasn't until just before the fires started that I realized why this hole-in-the-Great-Wall piece-of-shit Chinese place would carry this expensive crap to begin with. What's that? Alright. Maybe I shouldn't say that. I don't know. I'm old. What I'm trying to tell you is they had this drink but they didn't have sweet tea.

Anyways, I'm sitting at a table and Riley sets the can in front of me and just stands there waiting patiently for his old man to try the stuff. I tell him I don't want to try something I didn't ask for.

He says, "How will you know you don't want it until you try it?"

Then the owner says they are free of charge. "On the house," he says, bald and smiling and nodding like they do when they're excited. Riley just keeps looking at me all serious. Ready to judge, like. He's acting more like my oldest. Danny would do that, he and I usually made all the opinions for the family, and Riley would just go along. Not grudgingly, either. Happy to be a part of something, you know? I remember, when he was little...

Ah, shit. Give me a second. Goddammit. Okay.

So, I think: fine, whatever. Not worth the trouble in not trying. I take a sip from the can and it's awful. Plastic and tangy and waxy, like I'm chewing on a crayon dipped in vinegar. I notice Riley studying my face real close.

I tell him, "I don't like it."

He looks confused, surprised, maybe a little angry. Finally says, "Well, I guess it's not for everyone."

He won't talk to me the rest of the meal. Stonewalls me. I try bringing up bikes and nothing. I try bringing up girls and nothing. Even when I bring up baseball, his favorite thing, he just nods and grunts, like you do when you're telling someone to fuck off without telling them to fuck off.

I finally give up and we eat in silence and I can't make heads or tails of what's going on. I ask him if he wants to ride to the pool hall with me after lunch and he says something's come up. He gets up and makes his way to the front of the store, throwing his plate away at the can by the door, then leaves, no good-bye, no sound except for the jangling of the bell over the door. I look at the China man like "what the hell?!?" and he glares at me and then disappears in the back room. Riley's Harley roars outside and the boy's gone.

I figure I'll let it go. What else can an old man do? I decide not to mention it to the guys because I think Riley might inherit the businesses one day. Manage the pool hall and the other thing. Danny sure as shit won't, he never wanted any part of it, and James and Clayton are good kids, but they have their own issues with reason and the law. If the guys found out Riley was acting strange on me, sulking on account of his old man failing a damn taste test, they might start looking for someone else to run things once I'm gone.

Anyways, after the thing with Riley I head home. Nice place, just my house and Ted's, tucked away in the pine out near Howard. Bonnie gets back from shopping, or getting her nails done or whatever it was, and I tell her what happened at the restaurant, that Riley had been in a foul mood and left, gone off somewhere to do I don't know what.

She asks me, "Why's he mad at you?"

I say, "I don't know if he is. I asked if he wanted to ride with me to the pool hall."

She asks me, "And he said no?"

I answer, "He didn't say nothing."

Bonnie looks at me as if we must be talking about someone else. I guess we kinda was. I guess so.

I go to smoke out back and Ted Barton spots me from over the fence. He's chopping kindling. I can smell something cooking in the fire pit he's got. He stops and comes toward me, leans on the fence. Smiling, but in an off way, like it's his first time.

I ask him, "Everything okay?"

He says, "Sure is."

I ask him, "What you cooking?"

He says, "Venison. Killed her just this afternoon."

I ask him, "You cooking it with bacon or something? Doesn't smell like venison."

He says, "Nah."

Ted looks like maybe he wants to tell me something or ask me something. But he doesn't ask or tell me anything. Just smiles and stares, like an old doll.

I say, "Well, best get back inside. See you at the usual time, Ted. Give my best to Kimmie."

He says, "I sure will."

I think about his answer now and then. With what was... I get chills, you know?

This was May, months before the fires, long before even the... what was the bastards name?... the Kiernan reports. I remember it was May because some of my customers at the bar, the regulars, they started disappearing. I'm sure you heard about all that, drunks disappearing and such. God, seven short months ago, can you believe it?

One of my bartenders, young fella, hair cut like a faggot and a piercing through his nose like a bull, he starts insisting we carry **Revival** as well. Tells me he can make all kinds of cocktails with it.

I say, "Cocktails."

He says, "Mixed drinks."

I tell him to stick to Jack and Cokes. He shoots me the same look Riley did. I figure maybe this is how--the fuck is it y'all call yourselves? Millennials?--maybe this is how y'all have been learned. So used to cell phones, you forgot people can still see your face after they've told you "no."

And when... when James pulled the shotgun on me, he had that face too. I could see it in the light of the flames as the house went up.

Soon, some of the bev reps are coming to the bar and pushing it on me, too.

I ask them, "All of you carry it? Ain't that against the rules?"

They tell me, "Special circumstances. It's just that good."

Even Jeanette, this older rep I'd known for years, knew what I liked to carry and never once tried to sell me any of her fancy gimmicky stuff, even she starts offering me this fucking godawful drink. I think she's

joking when she first pulls the can out of her little bag. I even laugh: "Oh, Lord," like that.

But she keeps going, with this grin bigger than the Chinese one, saying, "Here now, Buddy. Try it. It's not so bad." Claims everyone's drinking it now.

And the sales she promises me. "Smartest economic decision since the Louisiana Purchase." Feels like a betrayal, if I'm being honest.

It was one thing for the young ones to get worked up over this stupid fad, this shiny little can of foul-tasting chemical pigshit. But Jeanette's damn near my age. She should know better.

I tell her I don't want it and she says I'm being stubborn. Boy, that does it for me. Jeanette wants stubborn? Hell, I'll give her stubborn. I'll serve it fried for her on a fucking biscuit. I tell her to take her samples and I suggest a few places she can store them. It isn't noon yet, so the place is empty, thank God, because I'm good and yelling now. I'm real hot now but that's okay because it's just me, her, and the twinkie bartender. Brad. God, even his name sucked.

I finish with Jeanette and she leaves about as angry as you'd imagine. But not because I yelled at her, it doesn't seem, or at least I don't think so now. No, I think she's angry because she didn't win. Because I don't want to serve fucking **Revival**. I look at the bar and notice Brad's eyes follow her, and then they snap on me, a cold reckoning in them. Mickey calls that look junkie-anger. When the junkie realizes you can't or won't give them what they want, that now to get what they want they'll

have to step on you first. So stepping on you becomes inseparable to the wanting.

Brad wasn't the one who lit up the bar, though. That was actually Jeanette. I wonder if she suspected then what they were gonna ask of her come December. If she was only waiting for a hand to give her the gas and the matches and a finger to point to where they should go.

Around this time, James gets the app on his phone. Says it gives you discounts on the cans. He shows me his phone, all excited; trying to convert me, I'm guessing. There's a calendar on the screen and James clicks on the box for today.

It reads: "Today's Goal: Try **Revival Twist: Lime!**"

I ask James, "It always just tells you to buy stuff?"

He says, "Not always."

Soon after that, cases of **Revival** are showing up on Bonnie's grocery lists. One week, there's the lemon kind; next, there's blueberry; then cherry. Bonnie and I are confused because James hardly ever drinks anything under thirty proof. Now he's wanting a whole case of this energy crap every week. Not that we can't afford it. I never raised a house to hurt for money. But when Bonnie asks him about it, James just kind of shrugs.

He says, "You don't have to understand." Alright, then.

Bonnie thinks maybe he's figuring out a way to resell the stuff, offering it at dogfights or something. She tries to pry it out of him, how he's going through so much of it, but whenever she says the word "**Revival**" to James he starts to tense up the way animals might do if you

get too close to their young. Eventually, she gives up and she asks Clay, his partner-in-crime. Clay confesses, all gloomy-eyed, that he has no idea what his twin brother's getting into. I think maybe he's upset thinking one fox isn't sharing the new henhouse with the other fox. But I'm also picking up some pure fear in Clay. These boys are close. James getting into something and leaving Clay out is as strange as Riley silently up and leaving the house three or four weeks prior.

A few of the guys start to bring this kinda stuff up at our meetings so I don't have to. Nat says his daughter spends most of the day checking the app. Paul says his pa, who suffers dementia, has started ordering cases for random people in the neighborhood. When Paul last tried to bring it up to him, he says, the old geezer pulled a knife. Imagine that. And Mickey, he tells us his wife keeps trying to switch out his beer for **Revival**. Claims she's looking out for the bastard's health. Now granted, Mickey has a real thing for drinking, had lost a few toes out of it and the diabetes. But it's mostly just beer he drinks now, and he's always had a heavy liver; he's Irish. Sheryl knew all that long before she married him. He'd never get mean, just a little loud. And rowdy. Between you and me, I suspect she liked it a little. Mickey's a fun one after a few, a big loud red fun drunk, and she's the type who gets bored easy. Never find her at a book club. So replacing booze with that garbage? That's a funny one.

What's even stranger than what Nat and Paul and Mickey are saying is that the rest of my guys aren't showing. I call them and they tell me they can't make it, they have various family emergencies or whatever. Makes no

sense. Listen, I'm no saint. I've said that before, haven't I? Well, I'm not, and I never claimed to be. What the guys and I do... I don't just run a bar. I have a little side hustle. Can I leave it at that? Hell, you and your people, you probably know exactly what I'm talking about, right? I mean, our shit's gotta come from somewhere, right? Listen. I'm just saying it's real serious, what we do. We deal with bad people sometimes. Not that I'm a saint, like I said. I'm saying if we're not careful, if we mess something up, we get in a lot of trouble. But, you know, if we do everything right, we make a lot of money. So everyone shows up when there's a meeting. Everyone.

Except now. Now half my crew is MIA. What the fuck? That's when I know something serious is happening. World's starting to rip at the seams a little. What can I do? I don't have time to babysit. And to be honest, it doesn't matter, because I haven't heard from our contacts in over a week. So there's nothing to push anyways.

He tries to adjust himself on the cot, wincing. It's getting worse, isn't it? he asks me. He must have seen me making a face. I look away. I want to tell him I am sorry for the face but I say nothing.

I... I think I'm going to need help changing these bandages, *he says*. I don't think I can move my right arm much anymore. I apologize. You have the rest of my beans, chica. I'm not hungry.

It is night according to my wristwatch. The old man is feverish. He moans in his sleep. Sometimes his eyes open, only slightly, showing nothing but white, the pupils rolling frantically under his eyelids. At one

point, he starts grabbing for something in the air with his good arm. I am almost asleep, sitting with my back against a shelf of tomatoes and green beans stored in cans of various sizes. The man has split himself open with his activity. From under the bandages, more of the putrid foulness is weeping, pink with blood. I gently grab his hand and he opens his eyes, awake, alarmed. I think he is going to try to punch me. Instead, he holds my hand.

We met at a bar, *he tells me*. I don't believe in love at first sight, but when I saw her, I knew I could love her. She was a friend of some friends, I don't remember which ones. We met and suddenly everything was for Bonnie. The jokes, the beer, it all belonged to her. Hell, even the lights over the bar hung for her. It was her scene, her world I lived in. I just wanted to be in the world with her. I wanted to stay there.

We were at the bar for trivia. I had just turned twenty-one. I was trying not to get drunk and almost succeeding. My friends laughed and teased me because I couldn't stop looking at her. I didn't care. No one else mattered. When trivia was over, they left. Everyone but Bonnie. I asked her to play pool. I said if she won I'd buy her a beer and if she lost I'd kiss her. She scratched on the eight. I knew I could love her. And I knew when I did, I'd never stop.

She died in our bed. I like to think the smoke got her before the fire, that she never felt a thing. I like to think she was dreaming of me as she went away. I wonder if, when I die, I'll dream of her. When I dream of her now, I wish I wouldn't wake up. So we'd be even.

An explosion rumbles somewhere above ground, followed a siren's wail. We are both silent, waiting for whatever is happening above us to pass.

I have decided not to eat before changing the old man's bandages for fear I will vomit in front of him. Pain and infection have ruined the man's right side completely. He sleeps favoring the left. A blackness is spreading from beyond the reach of the dressing. He is refusing food now.

I convince him to drink some water before he continues, telling me that Ted was an officer, and he always brought a dish his wife, Kimmie, made with him, every time he came to collect. He was convinced there was still some honor in what he was doing if he gave something in return. Green bean casserole, stuffing, peach cobbler, that sort of thing. All in these brown dishes Kimmie said her grandmother made. She was Cherokee.

My uncle had a dollop of red in him. Tall son of a bitch. Dry as a desert, believe it or not. Real funny, though; claimed his grandfather could turn into a crow. Some crazy shit.

Ted's on the front porch, the usual day and time. I notice he doesn't have anything with him.

I ask him, "You trying to starve us?"

He says, "Wife's down with something."

I say, "Come in. Beer's in the fridge. Bonnie's out with the other old ladies. I'll get the stuff for you."

I go and grab the money out of my office and head back to the kitchen. Ted is leaning against the counter and damned if a can of **Revival Red** ain't in front of him. He's drinking it and looking serious as cancer down at the countertop.

"Ted?" I say. "Ted." I hand him the envelope. "You on the wagon now?"

He says, "I prefer this. Ain't this stuff good?"

I say, "My sons tell me so."

He asks me, "Which ones are those?"

I say, "James and Riley." I'm feeling hot under the collar again, having about reached my limit on discussing the interests of soda with folk.

Ted says, "Them's good kids," and puts the money in his pocket.

I say, "Must be bad, whatever Kimmie's down with."

He says. "Yeah. It is. Well, I best be leaving."

I ask him if he's patrolling tonight.

He just says, "Wife needs tending," opens the front door and leaves, letting the screen door slam behind him like an asshole.

I don't know why the violence started that early in some places. Kimmie, and Paul getting it rough from his pa.

And David. Ah, shit. David.

I tell Bonnie when she gets home. There's worry painted all over her.

She asks, "Something wrong with the business?"

I say, "Nothing so far as he's concerned."

She asks, "What about Kimmie?"

I tell her, "Ted says she's come down with something. Is back with her now."

She purses her lips. Says, "I don't trust that old pig."

I guess I should have listened, given everything that happened. But how could I have known? And I had my reasons. I liked keeping Ted close, geographically and otherwise. I liked him stopping by once a week, making sure he'd never stop by any other time. Making sure he'd leave us be, and the law with him. I figured someone like Ted was a good kind of person to have on my side, just in case. Friends are good in my line of work. Friends with guns and badges are better.

Not a week later, I hear an angry knock on the door. I grab me a baseball bat on account of how the knocking sounds. Understand, I don't mind visitors. Not one bit. But that rapping on the door, that was the sound of someone wanting to kick my ass. And I know people who would love to see this old man knocked around. Be damned if they catch me unawares.

I open the door and realize it's not some tough guy. It's Danny. I haven't seen my eldest in almost two years. He never approved of me or anything I did. Drinking, smoking, hunting. Left when he found out how I

made the real money. Same money that afforded him the means to leave.
Life's nothing if not ironic.

He's standing at my door in nice clothes, nice hair, looking like one of those guys used to sell encyclopedias back in the day. Little Ford Focus sitting behind my Harleys on the driveway. Not a lick of country left in him.

Danny takes a gander at the bat. He says, "Good grief, Pa."

I say, "Danny. What is it, boy? What's wrong?"

He asks, "You know where Riley is right now?"

I tell him, "No. He left a while back."

Danny says, "He's with us. Me and Irene."

I say, "Then why'd you ask?"

Danny just keeps going. "Showed up a couple weeks back," he says.

"Claims he can't go home. Won't say why."

I ask, "You wanna come in?"

Danny asks "What did you do this time?"

I ask him, "The hell do you mean?"

Danny says, "You tell me. He's acting strange. Angry. Isolated. Talks to Irene a good bit but barely even looks at me. Listen," he says. "You didn't ever...".

I see he's looking at the bat again.

I ask him, "What are you getting at?"

Now how could he think that? I've never done anything like that to any of my kids. Never would.

Danny sounds tired. He asks, "What's going on?"

I tell him, "I don't know. That boy just started acting weird one day over lunch and then up and left. Seems there's been a lot of that going around lately. Can't figure why."

Danny starts to say, "Irene has..." and then he stops himself.

I say, "Come in. We got us some leftovers from Ted."

He says, "I best be leaving. Maybe another time." Makes his way to the car and stops, his hand on the door. Looks back at me.

He says, "He called Irene. Instead of me. His own brother."

I don't know what to say to him. Not the first time. But I would have said something. If someone told me that was the last time I'd see him, told me the danger he was in...

Well, we just had no idea. No idea at all.

Meanwhile, I notice Clay and James are starting to fuss. One time, I see James trying to show something to Clay on his phone.

He's saying, "Look, see? 'Today's Goal: Try **Revival Blue**.' And then you get rewards." Showing his phone to Clay like it's a trophy kill.

Clay's confused. He asks, "How are they rewards if you have to pay for them?" I think it's a fair point; the cans aren't cheap. James is now giving us a hundred a week to pay for all the **Revival** he's drinking. I don't know where the money is coming from, and I'm smart enough to play dumb.

James tells Clay, "You get points from the cans for cool shit."

Clay gives him a "so fucking what?" look.

None of this is like them at all. Usually they're close as flies on shit, either trying to sell me and Bonnie their latest scheme or explaining to us why it wasn't their fault the last one didn't work. And usually there's something about asking for money in there, too. Said in a sideways manner so no one's pride is on the line.

Now they act like they've never once understood the other. Breakfasts and dinners are silent. Bonnie tries to break the silences with what nonsense she's heard on the news: "drunkards are starting to fade away" or "a man near Sylvester claims his wife turned into an armchair," that sort of thing.

She says, "The best seasoning in any meal is loving conversation."

But the boys are having none of it. There's a wall of confusion and anger and, I'll say it, heartbreak between them. Clay watching with disgust as James drinks his cans and scans the barcodes for his points.

I'll tell you something: before all this mess, James and Clay were really less like sons and more like expensive pets, least that's how Bonnie and I dealt with them. They'd wake up late, take breakfast in whatever was left of the morning, ride out around noon, be back for supper at seven, then ride out again to perform whatever dumb night shit they'd concocted. Come home real late, three or four in the morning, if at all. Sometimes they wouldn't get home for a week at a time.

Now James never leaves, just lies on the couch or in his room playing the game. Clay's trying to draw him out, coming at him all stealth-like: "Sure is a nice evening," or "I hear Margo's wanting to go to the

movies." That kind of thing. James just brushes him off, or ignores him outright.

Clay sometimes yells at him through the bedroom door: "It's a fucking game!"

James yells back: "You just don't get it!" If he responds at all.

Things are even more sideways at the pool hall. This is about midsummer now, round the time **Revival** started its news channel and began building that big awful thing in Midtown. I'm sitting down at a table in the dining room, trying to refigure the bar's finances now that some of my regulars have gone missing, when Brad comes at me, strutting like a rooster.

He says, "I quit."

I say, "What's that? Not even two weeks?"

He says, "Got a better offer."

I ask him, "Where?"

He says, "Ray's Tavern."

I say, "Ray's? Well, good luck with that, Brad. You motherfucker. I know the manager. You might think you're a chick, but I think you're missing some of the, uh, actual parts he's looking for."

Brad's grabbing his tumblers from behind the bar.

He says, "They're going to serve **Revival**. Whole cocktail menu lined up."

I can't believe it. I'm being dumped for a fucking soft drink.

I tell him, "You know what? I think you and Ray'll get along just fine, you fucking pussy." No offense, of course. I stare at my spreadsheets and listen to him walk out. Looks like I'm pouring tonight, I think.

I send a text out to the guys to meet at the back of the pool hall early. As usual, Paul, Mickey, and Nat are the only ones to show.

I look at the empty chairs. I'm like, "What the hell?" They shake their heads. I try calling the others. No one's picking up. My dumb fucking bartender left and over half my crew is no-call-no-show.

I notice Paul's hand is wrapped. I ask him, "What happened there?"

He says, "It's just a cut."

Fuck, ow. My side. Fuck my damn side. Give me a minute.

That night, I hear glass breaking in my backyard and step out to find Clay drunk as the Fourth of July. He's throwing empties against an old stump I can barely see in the dark beyond the porchlight. I point at a few bottles on the steps leading down from the porch onto the yard.

I say, "Quite an army you got there."

Clay doesn't answer, just grabs a soldier by its neck and rears it back and lets loose. It goes into the night and disappears, then I hear it crash against the stump.

I ask him, "What's wrong, now?"

Clay hurls another bottle. A few seconds later, I hear it make the stump.

I say, "Clay, answer your old man."

He reaches for the neck of another one and I grab him by the wrist.

I ask him, "Where's your brother, boy?"

He finally says, "I don't know. He mentioned something about going to see Riley somewheres. Ain't seen him since."

I say, "Okay. Well, least he's with family."

Clay polishes off his beer and cocks his arm back like he's ready to chuck it at the stump with the others. Then the booze takes his legs and he stumbles and trips against the stairs and sits down hard.

I stare down at him. "Jesus dickswinging Christ," I say. "What's gotten into you, Clay?"

He gets up slow, reaches in his pocket and takes out his phone, hands it to me.

He says, "This shit," and goes inside the house. I'm standing out there with the bugs screaming, looking at the phone. The app's pulled up on it, with the calendar and the daily goal.

"Today's Goal," it reads. "Leave them all behind."

Think I'm gonna take me a nap right quick. That's all for now.

The bunker is stocked with plenty of canned goods: vegetables, soups and stews, meat. Curiously, I find no bottled water. In addition to the single cot and shelves of food, there are a few supply boxes and a chemical toilet and a shower stall and a hand pump near a spigot for tap water. I do not know the source of the water, if it is from a well or a facility, and on the first day I did not know if the ones who drove us here might have poisoned the source, so I would not touch the pump. I drank

the water in the canned vegetables, disgusting as it was, but it was not enough. By the third day, the old man, feverish, was moaning for water. I wanted to help him. So I used the hand pump and poured him water in an empty can and myself a can of water and we drank and waited to see what would happen. The man slept and when he awakened he was crying. Sometimes I think I can still hear that stupid horn, he said.

The shower stall in the bunker was small and lacked a curtain. Initially I did not want to bathe in front of the man. But the days passed, though we could not see them, and by the third week I felt so filthy, and the man was so weak and full of fever and incoherent, that I no longer feared undressing in front of him. I showered and then washed my clothes in the stall with the bath soap and then hung them over the curtain rod to help them dry. I wrapped myself in a relief blanket from one of the supply boxes. It felt itchy and barely covered me. If the man saw me do any of this, he politely declined to comment.

The old man's moaning rouses me from a world of fire. At first I think his cries are only made of pain. But then I hear words strung into the pain, and the necklace of words becomes a memory. There she is. She's coming out of the water. I'm talking with Mickey. So many. So many summers ago, now. I see her. Danny, shit, waist-high. Off in the woods somewhere. Already gone. Sun on Lanier. Like God spilled diamonds. She comes out. Like trivia all over again. The lake and the sun and God. Parts of her story. I pull her close. Want to feel the water on her. Hair smells like

the lake. We are animals. I understand. Young and stupid animals.

"Careful," she says. Patting her belly. It's big and smooth. Full of life. Both of them. She's a world. A nest. I can smell her hair. Danny's in the woods. Birds. Animals. Loving so much we kill everything else.

It is as if the old man's body is trying to push everything out of him, but there is nothing left. His retching is unproductive. His body arches as he tries to vomit and I fear he will split himself again under the rotten bandages. The convulsions eventually subside and the old man appears alert once more. His eyes are open wide. One eye is clouded with blood.

You remember their jingle? "It's time to wake up. Wake up and revive"? It's playing on the tv over the bar at the pool hall when Jeanette comes in. Her normal time, just before open. Just me in the bar now. She walks up to me looking fit to be tied.

I say to her, "Afraid I'd never see you again." Trying to charm her a little. Figure water's under the bridge by now, but her expression doesn't change.

She says, "On my recommendation, Southern Beverages is no longer providing services for you or your bar."

I say, "On your recommendation?"

She says, "I'm only telling you in person because we've known each other for so long."

I say, "You've served me for over ten years, Jeanette. Been to my house, babysat my boys, watched them grow into men, more or less."

She says, "Don't make this difficult."

I say, "Just tell me why."

She says, "Because," and then stops, and I think for a moment the old part of her's come back swinging at the new part.

She says, "It's time to try something new."

With that she walks out the door. I watch her go, thinking I'll never see her again. Course, I will, much later, at the same door, and things will be different then.

Paul and Mickey and Nat and I are meeting every week to discuss the other business. Paul's looking rough. He comes in with bandaids, dressing, a knee brace.

He tells us, "It's my pa. Fucker's trying to kill me. Threw hot coffee at me yesterday morning. Almost got me. Won't shut up about this **Revival** nonsense, poor bastard. I'm trying to show him patience, on account of the dementia. I'm all he's got."

Mickey says, "Least you still got him. Sheryl just upped and left. No fucking clue where. 'Gonna try something new, Mick,' she says. Like I'm a pair of pants that don't fit no more."

I say, "Jesus, Mickey. When did this happen?"

Mickey says, "Last week. I thought she'd come back. Now I just don't know, Buddy. I just don't know."

Nat chimes in: "I don't get it. Tastes like processed cow piss. That's the strangest part, you know? How they could even like this stuff, much less love it. It's beyond me."

I'm wondering the same thing. I don't watch the news much. Don't trust it; everyone's got an agenda. But Bonnie did. She watched the local stuff, said she wanted to be an informed citizen. Between you and me, I think she liked all the crazy domestic violence stuff the most. "Man kills grandmother over winning lottery ticket." "Suicide survivor claims demon children told him to do it." "Father drowns daughters in Allatoona." That sort of shit.

She's watching the news one day and she calls me over and I think she's going to show me one of those kinds of stories. Instead, the news is about **Revival**. Should've known it would be. The company's just used the app to tell everyone to up and quit their jobs. I can't believe it. "Try quitting your job." Plain as that. And, by God, people are doing it. Quitting by the thousands, by the hundred-thousands. Now Wall Street and investors and all kinds of money people are starting to freak out. And their freaking out is causing others to freak out.

Bonnie asks, "How you just going to quit your job for a soda drink?"

I tell her, "Can't figure out the world."

I try to treat this like I treat most bad stuff on the news. This too shall pass, and all that. But Riley is gone. James is gone. People are disappearing.

The news says, "Coming up: more people morphing into furniture. But first, the weather."

And the weatherman, or shit, weatherperson, whatever the fuck I'm supposed to say, comes on, and it's someone I've never seen before. I don't think about this until much later, but I think now the regular one had quit that day, too.

That's when the news starts getting real fuzzy, and there are different reports about what happens next. I heard as much as thirty percent of Americans left their jobs that day. I pull everything I can from the bank and put it, earmarked, with the club money in a safe we got in the clubhouse at the back of the pool hall. Figure it's safe there; an atom bomb couldn't take that safe out, or so they said when they sold it to me. Kinda like this here bunker.

I try to tell Bonnie that everything's going to be fine. That the Sampsons always survive. All that shit. But she can tell I'm not so sure now. She wants to believe me but she just can't. That's about the time she gets herself prescribed Ambien. To help her sleep. I didn't like it then, but Lord, now, I hope it worked. I hope... when that fire... shit. Maybe more, later. I'm tired now. I'm very tired.

The old man says he is cold. He is shivering. I ask him if he is thirsty but he does not answer. He does not drink when I hold the bottle to his lips. Heat radiates from his bandages and if I touch them even slightly he starts to scream. I have not changed him for at least a week.

His skin is black from armpit to waist. I am accustomed to the smell if I stay on my side of the bunker, near the tomatoes and green beans and chemical toilet. When I am near the bandages, the stench of the rot is overpowering. We have agreed not to deal with the dressings anymore. I believe it is, for both of us, a surrender.

His fever spikes, and when he speaks, his eyes are closed. He is at a part of the story I do not yet understand. Mickey has his bike and I drive the truck. I tell myself, "I will get home." Paul is next to me. Nat is in the bed. His leg is not a leg anymore. His blood is everywhere. I think he's not gonna make it. I tell myself to focus. Just drive. Mickey, screaming. The fires have started. World smells like smoke. Cars. Sideways, blocking the road. Burnt black. Mickey yelling and pointing. Headlights on the cars. Men behind the cars with guns. Flashes of light. I hear popping. Windshield bursts. Glass. Everywhere. Catches Paul. Holding his face. "Sonofabitch, sonofabitch." Mickey behind us. Headlight in my rearview mirror. Light starts bouncing. He's bouncing on the road behind us. Burned cars coming. Closer. Closer. I will get home. I say, "Paul." He says, "Buddy." I say, "Okay," and step on the gas. Ram the truck through the cars. Knock my head against the wheel. Nat. I don't know. Think I broke his neck. I don't know. Paul says he was already dead. The blood. I don't know. Turned funny. Looking away. He's looking away. Paul says, "Don't think I can see." Fire beyond the trees in places. I tell him, "Just hang on." A headlight busted. Fender sparking on the road. "Just hang on, Paul." Bonnie. Bonnie. I will get home.

His skin is pale and mottled as a bird's egg. The poison is everywhere in him now. I assume there is little of his life left for him.

*Despite this, he is lucid. He is mentioning now "The Kiernan Reports." That's right, I almost forgot the name. If we didn't know how bad things were before then, we knew now. "CIA investigations compromised." "Diplomatic missions cancelled." That man over in... what was it, France?... with all those stolen documents. "President tries to fire cabinet"; now that one really got people going. All the stats: how many people drink **Revival**, what kind of people they were, money level and race, and such. Also that thing about how the government knew the violence had already started, that some of these folks drinking **Revival** were already, what was it, "engaged in violent criminal activities." That Kiernan guy leaks all this, people start pulling their heads out of their collective asses and listening. But it's too late. I think we all knew it was maybe too late to do much by then.*

At this point, Clay's mostly in his room, waking up long enough to drink himself back to sleep. I'm in his room and I wake him up.

I say, "Show me how to get on that app again."

So we search the app together, then we get on his computer, scanning websites, news reports, looking for clues, anything that might offer an explanation. He shows me places where people talk to each other, and we find all these groups worried about what **Revival** is doing to people and other groups supporting **Revival**.

A support group says, "They'll never understand you. Just like they'll never appreciate the refreshing taste of **Revival Cherry-Vanilla**."

One little girl, I remember, she looked like she must've been about eight in her picture: "My mom doesn't like **Revival** and I had to leave and now I don't have a family."

And all these people: "We will be your family. Message us. Come live with us."

I think of Riley. Riley, barely twenty. And James. This company took our family.

I tell Clay. "We'll get them back. We're Sampsons. We come home."

I call Danny. Surprise, surprise, he answers. I ask him how it's going over there.

"Not great," Danny says. He sounds worn down. "Irene's acting bizarre. Distant. Like we must've had a big fight, but we didn't. I don't want to be the kinda guy who always asks his wife if she's okay, but I can tell something's not right. She won't tell me what it is, though. She spends more time with Riley and James than with me. They've locked me out. Not physical like, but when they're talking, if I walk into the same room, they'll stop talking, and it's just an eerie silence, them clearly waiting for me to high-tail it. And if I don't, if I stick around, they'll end up moving to a different room. And Pa, get this. Irene quit her job. She quit her job! She loved being a nurse. She used to love helping people."

I say, "Son. I don't know what's happening. But I think you need to come home. I know we've been a little, I dunno, estranged or whatever at this point. But this family needs to come home. Right now."

Danny says, "She won't go for it. I know Riley and James won't neither."

I tell him, "We'll convince them later. But something's obviously wrong. I need you here."

Danny says, "I'll try talking to her, tomorrow. This is gonna sound dumb, but I think they're somewhere close. Listening. I can hear them." Then he hangs up.

"Danny," I say. Nothing.

And that's it. That's all for Danny. That's all. Ah, fuck... ah, dammit. Maybe he's okay. Maybe. I don't fucking know.

The water has stopped running. I check the shelves of canned food and assorted tools for bottles or gallon jugs of water, knowing I have checked before and will find nothing. There have been no sounds from above for two or three days, and I wonder if maybe it is safe above us. Unless the water turns back on, and I have no reason to believe it will, we will die if we do not leave. I will die. I do not tell the old man that the water is gone. Let him pass in peace, I think. Close to death, he is not drinking. More than a month without treatment, the wound has festered and spread blackness across him so remarkably and expansively it is as if he is no longer of one race. I am so familiar with the smell of rot that I

can no longer detect it. In much the same way, the man appears acquainted with his impending death. He no longer winces or screams or cries against it.

He speaks calmly, saying, I was talking about who, now? Danny?
Yes. Yes, that's right. Such a wonderful kid. I was never fair. I wish I could tell him that. If you see him--you wouldn't know, would you? No. Of course not. So I try calling him back, but he's not picking up.

It's late, and Bonnie has just taken her Ambien. Any minute she'll be slurring hard as a Christmas drunk. I tell Clay to watch her while I go to check on Danny. Clay's hammer-drunk; I can only imagine the conversations those two had while I was gone. But Clay at least can handle himself in such a state. You don't get mixed up in the things Clay and James do and not know how to take a punch and throw it back. I know if any weirdness comes, he'll handle it. I figure I'll come back and they'll be passed out drooling on themselves but they'll be safe.

So I call Mickey, who doesn't live too far, and we ride our Harleys down 41 to Vinings, to Danny's place. Little runt of a house, costs more than my three acres combined. I knock and nothing happens. I call Danny and it goes straight to voicemail. I look at his Ford Focus sitting there in front of our Harleys and knock some more. Mickey's moving around the side of the house, trying to look through the windows, maybe find a back way in. I'm calling and knocking and Mickey comes round the corner opposite where he'd started.

He says, "No one's here, it don't seem. But I think I saw blood."

That's it for me. I kick on the door a couple times and it opens.

The house is dark, the curtains drawn shut at every window. The tv is turned to a music station, not just any station, I remember. **Revival Music**. Loud, wordless music coming from the tv's sound system. Mickey grabs the remote and mutes it.

There's a coffee table upturned in front of the tv, the glass in the center cracked. A few pictures knocked off the wall in a hallway leading to the kitchen. There's blood on the kitchen tiles and a few shoe prints coming out of the blood, cross-hatched across the floor.

Mickey stares at the blood. Says, "We should call the cops."

I say, "Let me try Ted. He owes me."

I call him but he doesn't pick up. Of course he doesn't. At the time I had no idea what was going on with that fucking cop. So I told Mickey we'd pay him a visit in person.

We leave for my place. 41 is jammed heading north so we take 185 instead. A mile off the road, among the Midtown skyscrapers, I see the thing **Revival**'s been building. Gold and white, shining, the frame already finished. A bunch of wires and such inside it.

I ask Mickey when we get back to the house, "You see that thing?"

He says, "Yeah. And you know what, Bud? I've played in some bands over the years. I swear that thing looked like the innards of a speaker cab."

I run into the house to check on Bonnie and Clay, who are sitting in the living room trying to out-snore each other. I leave and head with

Mickey over to the Burton's and bang on the door until Ted finally answers. He opens the door but keeps the screen between us. He's glaring at me, the prick.

I tell him, "I think Danny's in trouble."

He doesn't blink.

I keep going: "Mickey and I went over to his place. There's blood in the kitchen. It's everywhere. Some of their stuff's been messed with. Looks like a bad scuffle. Real bad. Everyone in the house is gone."

Ted's not reacting to a damn word I'm saying. Just keeps glaring at me through the screen.

Eventually he coughs. Says, "Can't help you."

I glare back at him. "The fuck did you just say?" I think of all the money I've given him over the years and feel the heat rise up in me.

Mickey's shuffling behind. "Careful, boss," he says. "That's a cop, now."

Ted says, "Can't help you. Call the police."

I tell him, "You are the fucking police. Don't you forget how many times I've let you in my house. Time to serve and protect, motherfucker."

He says, "Not anymore."

I ask, "Come again?"

Ted says, "I ain't a cop anymore. I quit."

I say, "Then what's to stop me from coming in their and running your face through your furniture, you cocksucker?"

He says, "My friends." At the time, I thought he meant his cop friends, which itself was a good point. Those cops'll cheat, murder, steal, and burn the world, but they'll always have each other's backs. Kind of an honorable life, if you think about it.

I think if I mess with Ted, it'll garner me the wrong kind of attention. I say to him, "If you came to me, and it was Kimmie, I'd've helped you."

He says, "You can't hurt Kimmie. No one can. Get off my property." He slams the door on me. From behind, I feel Mickey's hand on my arm, pulling me to him, and it's a moment before I realize I'm trying to walk up and kick my way through another door.

I could've called the cops. But then what? I'd never called the cops before. Never liked them. Not even if a fight broke out at the bar; I could handle that shit myself. I was afraid if I called them, if they looked into Danny, they'd look into me. And then what would they find? Drugs? Blood? I'm not a good man. Never said I was. I won't even pretend to say I'm a good man who does bad things. I don't regret what I had to do to get where I was. You think your people have it hard, like they're the only ones? I grew up poor as the red clay under me. You know what? Forget it. Forget this shit. I don't know why I tell you anything. I don't owe you a fucking thing, chica.

I hear him wheezing and think that this is it, this is the coda of his dying. I wait through the night for death to happen. The man begins to

cough, turning his head and hacking, and when he stops there is a blackness leading from the side of his mouth onto the sheets of his cot.

The lights in the bunker go out for a few seconds, and when they come back on they are not quite so bright and there is a humming from somewhere behind one of the walls. That means we've about 10 hours left, he says. If it's a gas generator. I need... could you... get this off my mouth, dammit. Thank you. Thanks, that's better. I feel much better now. Where were we? We left off at the start of this month, that right? Right. Just before... okay.

Just before everything goes completely to shit, I try to call my contacts, the not-so-savory ones. We hadn't gotten any shipments in a while, and I'm relying on the money the bar's making and nothing else; and it isn't much, what with the regulars all vanished. No one's picking up. We haven't seen or heard from James or Danny or Riley in weeks. Bonnie is taking Ambien during the day now, sitting in front of the tv in a haze, napping and waking up and crying and napping again. Clay leaves and finds alcohol and comes back to drink and breaks the drinks in the yard and passes out in his room. Rinse and repeat, both of them.

I'm with Bonnie on the couch and we're watching **Revival News**, or I'm watching and Bonnie's nodding her head and then snapping it back up, looking at the tv like it might kill her in her sleep, and the reporter for **Revival** is promising exclusive coverage on the grand opening of the whatever-the-fuck they've been building in Midtown all these months.

Clay comes stumbling out of the bedroom cussing, saying, "They won't let me in. They won't let me in," and then more cussing.

I say, "Watch your words now. Your mother's still awake."

He just keeps repeating, "They won't let me in," over and over.

He's staring at the floor, hiding his face from me, or trying to, though the alcohol's got him weaving like a boxer. He sways and trips and falls flat on his ass on the living room carpet.

I say to him, "Clay," and he looks up at me, and I can see on his face where the tears have been falling out of his red-drunk eyes.

He says, "They won't let me in, Pa."

I say, "Who won't what?"

He says, "**Revival**. The app. It won't let me in. Says I don't have enough **Revival Points**. I can't see what they're saying anymore. I don't know what they're telling James."

Meanwhile, the tv is going on and on, the reporter excited as a puppy. "Any minute now," she's saying, as one of those helicopter cameras hovers over the gold and white building. "**Revival** says that all will be revealed. They are ready to show us the refreshing taste of the future. Reach into your soul and prepare for **Revival**. Prepare for glory! Now in raspberry-lemon."

The helicopter camera shows that around the giant square building in Midtown there are masses of people. Even high up, where you can barely make out the faces, I see they all look a little like Riley and James. Something in the eye, you know? They're screaming and chanting, holding

signs and torches. Lots of torches. We thought it was all for spectacle, didn't we? Didn't think they'd actually use the fucking things. They're yelling "**Revival** is greatness!" or some such other nonsense, and I see on the tv two figures standing in the small space between the crowd and the building. A man and a woman, in robes of some kind, facing the crowd. The two of them hold hands and raise them, smiling, then lower them quickly. And then the blast.

I'm thinking, My God. Mickey was right. It's a damn speaker.

It sounds like a bullhorn, but warped, electric and distorted. So low it makes my guts crawl. Bonnie wakes up, dazed a little but alert enough to know whatever was supposed to happen just has happened and it ain't good. I watch the air ripple, like when a lure hits the water, see it circle out from the speaker. Chasing the ripple is glass breaking, people in the crowd falling like dominoes; the force must've hit the helicopter then, because suddenly the camera starts darting all over the skyline as the helicopter enters tailspin. I see nothing but blurs and hear air whistling on the tv and then static and darkness.

I curse. "Dammit," I say.

Bonnie whispers, "Oh Lord, what have they done?"

I flip to another news channel but they're all confused as us, they don't understand any of it. All I hear is panic and guesswork, nothing substantial, nothing to trust.

Clay comes in with his phone. I can see that fear has sobered him up a good bit.

He hands me the phone and says, "Look. There are people near the speaker filming with their phones. They're live-streaming." I stare at the screen, Bonnie looking over my shoulder, breathing heavy.

I see it then. The end times. People are taking their torches, I think, damn, there are a lot of them, were there this many before?, and they're breaking in stores and businesses and lighting them from the inside. I search for looters but can't find any. There are bodies on the ground, maybe some from the blast, maybe trampled, I don't know. A woman is screaming and another woman comes running up with a knife and puts the blade through the first woman's neck. Hardly a thought to it. Whoever's recording starts running, and there's breathing and cursing, and now the roar of the flames is starting to push out all the other noises, and I can't watch anymore. I give the phone back to Clay.

I tell him, "Stay with your mother."

Bonnie says, "Bud. Maybe Ted knows something. We should talk to Ted and Kimmie."

I say to her, "Don't go over there. Please, Bonnie. Clay, don't let her go over there."

Clay's not listening; he's thinking of James, I can tell, he's worried about his brother, about all his brothers, maybe. I am too, believe me. That's why I had to leave. I had to get my gang, what was left of it, together. And I had to get the money out of the clubhouse. All our money was in there. It was obvious something bad was going down, and I figured we'd need us some real cash.

I text Mickey and Paul and Nat to meet me at the bar, afraid I won't be able to reach them, but lo and behold, the text goes through. I think, Hot damn. Let me stay lucky. Let me stay lucky.

I use the family truck, since I need somewhere to carry the money and the guns from the safe. The route to the bar isn't very long, all back roads, which is good, since they'd probably already started blocking some of the major roadways with their cars parked sideways.

I get to the bar; it's empty, mostly on account of I'd stopped opening it a week prior from fear of all the weird shit leading up to this day and the money I was losing running a deserted bar. I unlock the place and run to the back office, to the safe. In a cubby in the safe above the cash are a few pistols. I nab a loaded Glock and put it in my waistband.

Mickey and Nat arrive and we start grabbing handfuls of cash and pistols and putting them in duffel bags kept behind the safe in case of emergencies.

We're stuffing the bags and Mickey says, "It smells like smoke, don't it?"

He's right; it does. But what the hell. One problem at a time, right? We fill the bags and then head back to the front of the house. We discover the source of the smoky smell: the wall and floor around the front door are in flames. It's a gas fire, spreading fast. I'm leading the three of us, we're about halfway to the burning door, and a shadow blocks part of the daylight.

I hear Nat say, "That you, Paul?" and then there's gunfire, three-round burst, and we're diving for cover and flipping tables in the dining room trying to shield ourselves from the bullets. Splinters of wood are flying around me, I'm trying to get a clear shot with the Glock around the table but the smoke and fire makes it difficult and I don't wanna risk emptying the mag because I don't have any spare ammo on me. The tables are disappearing like something invisible is eating them.

I realize I'm screaming, angry and afraid, I won't deny it. Nat is next to me behind the table, suddenly his side of the table explodes into splinters of wood and one of his legs is opened, pop pop pop up the length of it, blood spraying hot against me. Nat falls on his back, shocked, still firing his weapon, shooting the roof now.

I'm thinking, Fuck this. Not Nat, not Nat. Then the shadow stops shooting and I think maybe they're reloading, so I break from the table ready to let fly whatever I got left in the gun but I see whoever was shooting is already on their side, fallen so I only see their legs in the doorway.

Another shadow appears at the door and I'm ready to fire but it's Paul. Blessed Paul, he's got a bandage wrapped around his head and he's unloading his gun into the figure on the ground. He looks at me.

"My pa," he says. "Oh my God, Bud, is this hell?"

I tell him, "Paul. Nat's hurt. I'll start the truck."

Paul nods and runs in to help Mickey with Nat and I exit the building with my duffel bag and look at the shooter. Damned if it ain't

Jeanette, half her face turned to porridge. How she got a semi-automatic, much less learned to use it, I'll never know. Maybe **Revival** had been training these fools for months; they certainly acted like a militia, didn't they?

I start the truck and find cartridges for the Glock in the duffle bag. I take a few boxes and then load the bag in the truck bed. Mickey and Paul are carrying Nat between them. Nat's passed out, his leg barely connected.

"Put him in the bed," I shout from the truck, and then there's more gunfire, the heavy, steady thwomp of a Magnum this time, coming from somewhere in the woods behind the parking lot. Paul drops Nat and falls to the ground.

I'm thinking, Shit shit shit shit shit, in so many words. I pull out my pistol just as Mickey pulls his and damned if Mickey the Fucking Crack-Shot doesn't manage to hold Nat up with one arm and plug whoever's shooting us with the other before I can even spot them. Everything's suddenly quiet.

"Stay with them," I say to Mickey, then make a beeline for the woods. I see a body lying on the ground wearing some goofy cargo shorts and a bright orange tank top. I think to myself: "I should've known."

I lean over the body. "Hey, Brad," I say.

He's got a hole in him that looks like maybe it goes through a lung. He's breathing ragged like it. He doesn't look at me, just stares ahead, angry and dumb. I pull my pocket knife out.

I say to him, "I never liked you. Never. Not your clothes or your hair or your name. Ain't a Brad alive that's not a douche in my book." I turn his head, press my palm on the side of his skull to secure it, and drive the knife through his neck.

I run back to the truck. Mickey's trying to load Nat in the bed. Paul's still on the ground a few yards in front of the truck, his legs folded under him. He's breathing.

I call to him, "Paul."

He calls back, "I'm fine. Help Mickey."

Mickey and I finish putting Nat in the truck bed. He's already very pale, wakes up long enough to scream once and then passes out again.

Mickey and I head back to Paul.

I ask, "Paul, can you stand up?"

He says, "I don't think so. My legs are gone. Are my legs gone?"

Mickey says to him, "It's okay. We'll carry you to the truck. We need to go."

I ask Paul, "Can you still fire a gun?"

He says, "I think so, yes."

I say, "Good. You're up in the front with me."

He says, "Pa. He tried to--"

I say, "That's okay, Paul. One bastard at a time."

Okay. Little woozy right now. Not as bad as before though. Might actually finish this damn story. Wouldn't that be something.

He sleeps for a couple of hours and starts to moan. I think it's from the wound, the rot eating away at his side. The bandages over the wound have turned green with congealed ruin. But then I hear him say wake up, wake up, baby bird, please, and I know he's someplace in his story more painful than even that which is slowly taking his life.

The old man's fever is high again and it is hard to understand him when he awakens. I press a dry washcloth on his face, more for the tenderness such action represents than for any practical purpose. I check my wristwatch: in five hours, the power will almost surely be gone. Hopeless, I start to sing to the old man the first song that comes to me, "Wild Heart" by Stevie Nicks. This action seems to bring him some clarity, enough for him to continue his story.

No white light yet, *he says, almost a whisper.* I just want to apologize. While I can. To you, to people like you. About the way I've been. I'm not a great man. Wish I had been. Easy to feel that way now. Story's almost done. I wish... wish I had a better story.

First, I remember the fire. So much of it. I'd never seen anything like it. They burnt everything. Didn't they? My God. Just imagine.

Then, I remember Bonnie. In the front yard. Bonnie and blood. Covering her shirt and her jeans. She's over a body. Please, not Clay, I think.

Clay comes running. From the Barton's. Blood on him. Blood on everyone. I look closer at the body. In the grass. Ted.

Clay: "She wouldn't listen. Went to the house. I was in the bathroom."

Bonnie: "I knocked. No answer. I went to the back. The firepit. Bones, Buddy. Human bones. We hadn't seen her bring a dish. Not in a long time."

Clay: "So she's screaming. I head outside. Ted is there. He's got a gun. I don't. I yell at him. He aims at me. Ma wrestles with him. Gun shot. I run over. Ma is covered. 'Ma. Ma, are you okay?' 'It's not mine,' she says. Ted is bleeding. Ma takes the gun and..."

Bonnie: "Bones. Bones. I'm so tired now."

Mickey's gone. Nat's in the truck bed. I check on him. His neck is snapped. Paul's sitting in the cab. Face cut bad.

I tell him, "Nat. His neck."

Paul: "Already too late. He'd lost so much blood. That much blood. No chance."

I tell him, "Stay here. Let me get Bonnie."

Paul nods, mumbles.

I give Clay my Glock. Say, "Clay, watch Paul." I help Bonnie up. Off the grass. Head to the house. Moving slow. Shivering. Pain and fear. So cold. Ambien and shock.

I tell her, "Go lay down." Take her to her room. "I'll be right back." She nods. Lies down.

She asks, "Is James here?"

I ask, "You mean Clay?"

She says, "No." Then she is asleep. I kiss her cheek. The last thing. A nice thing.

Back outside. Clay's with Paul.

Clay says, "He looks bad."

I say, "I know. Help me get him inside."

Clay says, "Wait. Look." Points up the road. I look. Danny's Ford Focus. Coming. Should've known. Should've thought quicker. But I wanted my sons. Wanted them home.

Ford parks on the road. Behind my truck. Blocking it. Should've known. James opens the driver's-side door.

Clay runs to him. Says, "Fucker." Smiling. Partners.

James steps out with a shotgun.

I say, "No God please."

James fires into Clay. Clay erupts. I'm next to my truck. Passenger side. See it all. Can't process. I stare at James. Dumb. Silent. James pumps the gun.

I think, Shit.

James fires. Catches my side. I collapse. James pulls gas cans. From the car. Heads to the house. Walks inside. I smell smoke. Try to get up. Pain in my side. Holding me down. Glock near Clay. Maybe I can get to it.

But James is there. Standing over me. Flames in the house. Flames on the side of James. That look. Flames in it, too. Pulls shells from his front pocket. Loads the shotgun. See you in Heaven, Bonnie. In pool halls and great lakes above.

A handgun at James. Pointed at his temple. A bang and James on me. On me. Oh God. Oh God. My son. My sons.

Paul: "I get him?" Gun through the open passenger window.

I say, "You did." I say, "Bonnie. Bonnie." Fire in the first story.

House exhaling smoke. Bonnie up there.

I tell Paul, "Bonnie is up there."

Paul says, "You'll only die."

I say, "I want to die."

Paul says, "Fuck you. Go. Up the road. Find help."

I get up slow. I'm bleeding. Not too bad.

I tell Paul, "Be back for you."

Paul says, "I'll stay here." Smiles.

I head out. Down the road. Thirty yards, I hear a gunshot. From the truck. Paul. A good joke, I think. Stare back at my house. Orange to red. To black. I turn and walk. Keep walking. Ready for anything. Tired. Miles of tired. On the road. Lying down. Must have passed out. Must have. I don't remember.

Then I was awake. And alive. And here. Now it's nearly done. I'm almost there. Know what? It feels like nothing. Nothing at all. Thank you. Thank you for hearing me out.

The old man is shivering. When I pull the blankets over his chest he tries to fight them off. His face is taut with pain and anger. Go back.

Stupid bitch. Stupid fucking bitch.

Minutes later, the man passes away. An hour after that, the lights in the bunker go out.

I feel my way up the ladder and out of the bunker. I climb the cellar stairs and open its doors. The smell of fresh air is so thick that I feel I could drown in its sweetness. The sun is out. I squint at the grass, waiting for my eyes to acclimate. I lay in the grass and appreciate its texture and its fresh green scent. After many minutes, my vision is good enough to start looking for water.

My car has been burned, as has my neighbor's house above his bunker, above the old man. All of the houses in my neighborhood are destroyed. I am surrounded by large, black skeletons. No sign of anyone. No sound of distant cars. I start to walk down the road in the direction of a nearby gas station. Hopefully its insides have survived. I need water. I have never felt so thirsty in all my life.

Dig

Luke is in the passenger seat of the Civic and his neck is broken. I realize suddenly that I'm driving and brake the car hard on the empty highway. Luke's head rolls around like he's just eaten something fantastic and can't wait to tell me and I start crying and then I'm laughing while we sit on the highway. A marker on the shoulder ahead of us says this is Highway 17 and I remember we're heading to Edisto Island.

I get out of the car to pee and then I'm pouring sweat outside feeling good good good. I take my pants off to pee and then run my hands over my body. My hands go between my legs and I'm crying again and my hands feel good like someone's rubbing silk over me.

In Edisto, I'd dig with my little child's hands in the sand where the waves made it soft. The hole would fill up with water, the soft sides sloughing into the water and making a mush. I could never dig further than the mush and eventually I'd give up and wipe the mushy sand over my body like I was a warrior. The sand felt cool and slick on my skin. My hands on my body rubbing, rubbing now, my pants on the hood of the car and I remember I'm alone, Luke's dead in the car, I think of rubbing sand on Luke's body, my hands rubbing between my thighs, digging.

"Don't watch me, Luke," I yell at the car. Luke's neck is twisted so he's facing far to the left.

My piss under me is dark yellow and smells faintly like battery acid and the rest of me smells awful, salt and toxins and filth, and I wonder not for the first time if I'm finally dying. Most people are dead. They disappeared or killed each other suddenly and then many of the survivors were sad and raped and killed each other or took their own lives.

In Edisto, the beaches are white as book pages, and the tide comes in cold and dark blue.

Thinking of the ocean and the holes and the water surging up from the sand in the hole makes me thirsty. I put on my pants and grab a backpack from the back of the car and find a bottle of warm water next to a bag of pills with cartoon faces on them and drink. I throw the empty bottle on the road because who's going to stop me and get in the driver's seat and drive. Near the marker up ahead I notice a dog decomposing in the grass.

A middle-aged man is digging through an overstuffed trash can outside a seafood restaurant named Bernadette's. He stops to watch my Civic passing by. He's holding a yellow wrapper of something in his hand and eyeing me warily. *Do not take my food*, his look says.

When Luke was alive and I was with him, we spent some time together in a small house we found that was cotton-candy-pink on the outside. Most people had moved out of the big towns and cities from fear and we had the whole neighborhood to ourselves. We drank and Luke showed me his bag of drugs and we took them and in a while we were swimming through rooms in the house and built a fire in the fireplace and took things and burned them in the fire. Luke

found a dollhouse and started crying. We didn't burn the dollhouse. The water was still running in the house so we cooked all the food in the house and ate a little of it and threw the rest at each other and against the walls of the dining room, then we made love on the dining room table covered with mashed potatoes and bits of pancake and oatmeal and with potatoes and pancakes and oatmeal dripping down the walls.

I park the car on the side of a dirt road lined with oak trees.

Thinking of Luke I'm thinking of Luke now thinking of Mom and Dad my sister my sister Tara god she loved trains little trains and pecans STABBED she and they were stabbed soft squishing by the neighbor slipping on blood hurt my wrist burning in fire he lit himself smell of screaming...

The panic attack subsides and I start to breath again. It's like a white hot light inside me is slowly cooling, dimming. The sweat on my skin feels good in the ocean breeze.

"I'm sorry," I say to Luke. His head is turned to watch some seagulls fight over a bag of something left in the middle of the sidewalk.

I take two more pills and drive the car into an oak tree. Moss hangs from the limbs of the tree and everything is green and wonderful again. I step out of the car and onto the dirt road and smell the ocean air. Under the hood of the crushed car something is hissing and smoking. Luke's head is stuck halfway through the windshield.

I take the backpack from the car and walk the rest of the way feeling like music. I drink some water and begin to sweat a lot. I start to feel sick in my chest and my head hurts. My legs are sore from walking. The sun is setting and I am

getting cold. Long shadows stretch on the road and blend and become one long blanket of shadow.

The condo is light blue, weathered in places and peeling. The wooden steps leading to the front door are covered in seagull droppings. The front door is unlocked; everyone left in a hurry to escape the violence and most places are wide open.

"My old vacation home," I say to Luke and then remember that Luke is gone. Why did I leave him? I wonder. Because I felt good good good. Luke made me sad and I didn't want that.

The night after Luke and I made love in the dining room, we found a wine cellar in the basement of the house. Luke said he knew wine, and we drank the most expensive bottle, a 2014 Mayacamas Cabernet. We drank another bottle and pretended to have French accents. Luke poured wine in my mouth and chased it with a kiss and tried to have sex in the cellar but Luke couldn't get hard enough. He said he didn't feel good. I figured he was sick to his stomach. He went upstairs and I waited for him by the fire in the living room downstairs. I was drowsy with wine and watching the fire and I fell asleep smiling. I woke up and went upstairs and Luke was hanging by his belt in the room where we found the dollhouse. A chair was on its back behind him and a stain trailed down one leg of his jeans. He had pissed himself in death.

The condo looks as if it escaped the looting that went on for days after the violence. Its insides appear just as I remember from childhood. There is a cream-colored couch in the living room and a wide coffee table with a glass center in

front of it. Mom and I used to do jigsaw puzzles on the coffee table while we nursed our sunburns. A television set still rests on the same oak dresser, though the tv has a much bigger screen than I remember. The fridge is empty and warm inside. None of the lights are working and nothing happens when I turn on the sink faucet in the condo's narrow kitchen. Still, it feels comfortable to be somewhere I remember.

A glass door at the back of the condo leads to a wide outdoor patio. Dad and Tara and I would eat hotdogs on the patio and Dad would drink beer. Dad rarely drank but he would get pretty drunk and tell us stories about how he met Mom. Sometimes Mom would join us though she hated eating outside and Dad would say something Tara and I didn't understand and Mom would tell him to stop, though she'd be laughing.

One morning, while everyone else was still asleep, I peered through the glass of the patio door and saw an alligator. I watched it for many minutes and it blinked at me and didn't move. It was huge and took up most of the patio deck. Its face made it look like it was grinning at me, the smile filled with tiny sharp teeth. Dad told me its jaws were powerful enough to break my bones. So I didn't open the glass door and the alligator didn't move. We continued blinking dumbly at one another until Mom came and saw the alligator and screamed and pulled me away from the door.

I look through the glass door and see a man sitting in one of the patio chairs. He's fat and deeply sunburned, turned away from me so I only see the backs of his fleshy red arms and the rolls of his neck and his large waist sticking

out from the sides of the chair. He's dressed like a tourist, with a Panama hat and mostly-blue Hawaiian shirt.

I open the door and step onto the patio. The man doesn't turn or seem to notice. I stand in front of him, keeping my distance. His face is badly burned, not from sun but by something more awful and permanent. His eyes and nose are covered with scabs.

"Are you alive?" I ask.

"I think so," he says. His voice is soft. "Technically speaking. If you're going to kill me, you should do it now."

"What happened to you?"

"I don't remember."

"Do you live here?"

"No," he says. "I used to vacation here. I can't see it anymore but it feels like the same place."

"How did you get here?"

"I don't remember. I think I've been sitting here a long time."

"Is there food here? Anywhere?"

The man doesn't answer.

"I don't feel good," I say. "I need food."

The man ignores me. Where he's facing, beyond the patio, is a small grassy hill that dips down to a pond. A few alligators patrol the pond. Dad and I used to watch the pond and look for their eyes poking out of the water. I stare at the pond and don't see any eyes. In the middle of the pond is a small island where Dad and

I used to count herons. Once there were so many herons on the island that Dad used them to teach me how to count to thirty. The island is empty now.

"Have you been to the ocean?" I ask the man. "Is there anyone else here? I want to go to the ocean but I'm so tired. I think I just need some food is all. I want to go to the beach and lie down. I used to dig holes there when I was a kid."

"Shut up," says the man. "You're just a bitch. A stupid bitch."

"Don't say that," I tell him.

"A stupid lonely bitch. Fuck you."

"Stop it."

"You know," he says, "You could die if you wanted. I'd be glad to help you. Slam your stupid bitch head on the patio. You want some help? Stupid bitch."

"I mean it. That's enough."

"Just do something. You won't do anything. That's your problem."

I walk up to him and strike him in the face with my fist. I break one of his scabs and his face starts to bleed.

"That's not enough," he says. "You can't do enough, I can tell. Try again."

I start hitting him over and over. My knuckles are covered with his blood and his face is so red and melted it's barely human anymore. I stop punching and wonder if I've killed him. I'm shaking and start gagging from nerves. Nothing comes out of me but a thick stream of spit.

The man smiles, his teeth very white against the blood covering his face.

"If that's the best you can do," he says, wheezing. "You should go to the beach."

I run inside the condo and grab the backpack and leave through the front door. I pass neighboring condos and reach the road that leads to the ocean. In a few minutes I can hear the faint sound of waves crashing.

The ocean is bluish-gray and the sand is canvas-colored and soft. I think about taking another of Luke's pills but decide against it and choose instead to sit and watch the waves. It's late afternoon and the sun is out but I'm too hungry and sick-feeling to enjoy it. I think about digging but I'm too tired and dizzy and weak.

Tara and I would play on the rocks jutting into the ocean while Mom and Dad watched and dozed and told us to be careful whenever we started chasing one another. On the sandy part of the beach, I would run after the seagulls and Tara would get too close to the waves and they would bowl her over and she'd start to cry. We talked about this when we met up with my parents after the violence started. We sat in the laundry room and remembered Edisto and my parents would talk about how I'd keep digging trying to make the hole deeper and get frustrated at the water seeping into the hole.

When I saw Luke hanging by his belt from the overhead fan I tried to help him down because I knew he didn't belong up there. I didn't think of the belt or the fan, only Luke and how I needed him to come down. I tugged on him and heard a loud crack and realized this was no longer Luke, just his body. But I didn't want to lose even his body because I'd already lost everything everything everything so I found some shears in the garage of the house and cut him down. I held him and told him about Edisto and said I'd show him where I used to dig.

I'm starting to feel like I could sleep for a very long time and that when I wake up I won't be here anymore. I think about where I'll go and if it's the same place where Mom and Dad and Tara and Luke and Joanie and Sam and Rachel and Danny and Carter and Stephen and Becca went. I lie on the sand and it's so soft I think I could sink into it. I close my eyes and go down and down into the sand, beneath the water and the earth, where darkness waits for me.

Part II: Other Stories

Rednecks of the Universe

Max Whiten hated his hometown. Deer Run was small, hot, backwards, slow, racist, sexist, boring, and poor. It was the kind of town that treated its high school football team like minor gods, where the hub of high society was a half-stocked Wal-Mart and a stiff breeze could waft the smell of cowshit for miles in any direction.

Max hated the people of Deer Run most. They wore sunburns and hernias like medals of war. They talked about responsibility and accountability through one end of their chaw-gorged mouths and through the other they blamed everything they didn't have or like on socialists, communists, immigrants, queers, blacks, Mexicans, Jews, and liberals. They were raised to be farmers and drunks and Baptists.

"That shit-heel in the White House just trying to further his own kind," Max heard a particularly rotund and sun-roasted trucker say outside the Piggly Wiggly one afternoon. "Damn Socialist health care. So they don't got to work and still get the same medicine we do. You know he ain't even American?"

By middle school, Max, four-time Science Olympiad and amateur Asimov historian, knew he was not like them. In eighth grade, Max's science teacher pulled him aside after class one afternoon and told him of a brand new career: space ambassador. The position belonged to the United Nations Office for Outer Space Affairs. Even its acronym, UNOOSA, sounded to Max like something from an exotic alien language. Max vowed he would do whatever it took to represent

Earth at an intergalactic level. He did not want an extraterrestrial's first encounter with humanity to be with someone like *Dale*, who liked to set off firecrackers in the assholes of dead possums.

Committed to this new career, Max earned exemplary grades and went to a good college up north, where he continued to excel. He learned five languages: four that were alive and one that was very dead. He took extracurriculars he believed would further his qualifications and dated girls active in nonpartisan politics. Max applied three times to the Space Affairs office. On the third try, he was accepted.

Max's job with the United Nations, as well as his PhDs in astrophysics and social policy, took him to many strange and exotic places in the world. Max went on lectures from Lisbon to Laos, studied indigenous populations in the Andes, and argued the socioeconomic ramifications of various guerilla wars while drinking in tea rooms and hotel lounges. Max would often mention that he was from a tiny farming town named Deer Run. "I don't even detect an accent" was one of his favorite responses.

Sometimes his mother would call and Max would patiently listen as she told him about the summer's yield and how his high school's football team was faring and who his cousins were marrying.

"Is it another cousin?" Max would ask.

"What's that?" she would say.

"Are they marrying another cousin?"

"No, your cousin is getting married."

"God, nevermind."

His mother often asked him if he planned on visiting for Christmas or Thanksgiving. Max always answered that he was busy, which was sometimes true.

Max discovered with some dismay during his years abroad that many towns owned cows or other livestock. The smell of shit drifted through the breezes of Bolivia just like anywhere else. Families still gathered for conversation at markets and marked the same stars for the same reasons. Max found that only the names of the stars changed.

Other cultures also laughed at him like the people of Deer Run. He heard it when his hand-tailored boot sank halfway into a fresh pile of ox droppings. He heard it when a cockatoo flew out from a low tree branch, startling him and causing him to drop his machete. He heard it from his tour guide the time he mistook a prostitute for a beggar and gave her what the guide later told him was enough for a vigorous blowjob. Max hated these people so much he could not wait to represent them.

After decades of patience and hardwon promotions, Max Whiten was Ambassador of Earth. Three years later, asleep under satin sheets in an Austrian villa overlooking the Alps, he received a phone call.

"Dr. Max Whiten," said the voice on the phone.

"Yes? What time is it?"

"Big day for you, Dr. Whiten. We've just put the coordinates in your phone."

"Why? What's happened?"

"Turn on the news and you'll see. We'd like you in Kansas immediately. Congratulations and godspeed."

The spacecraft was shaped something like a bullet and no larger than a midsize SUV. Standing in front of the ship were two creatures a few feet taller than most humans and pink as gum erasers. The creatures had thin eyes and wide mouths and were communicating to each other with furious clacking noises. It appeared to Max like they were bickering.

His colleagues had wanted to dress Max in every award they could think of and make him look like a general. Max had selflessly discouraged this. He explained that he wanted to look as meager and unimposing as possible so as not to intimidate Earth's visitors with his credentials.

Max was dressed in a modest navy suit that felt very uncomfortable in the heat of a Kansas summer. His outfit seemed to shrink in the humidity, sticking and grabbing in places Max could not address with any dignity. Nonetheless, he was elated. He believed this moment was his destiny.

The two aliens stopped clacking and watched him as he cautiously approached them. Behind Max, dozens of tanks and hundreds of soldiers stood at attention, watching for even the slightest sign of trouble. Max thought they were all reckless idiots. Any organism smart enough to traverse the galaxy could easily dispense of something as ineffective and earthbound as the United States military.

The aliens traded a short volley of clacks and then one of them started walking in Max's direction. Max observed that the creature was not dressed in

anything resembling clothing and showed no recognizable genitalia. Around the creature's neck was a metallic collar. Two thin rods protruded from the collar to hold in front of the creature's mouth a slender metallic device that looked something like a harmonica.

Max stopped a few yards from the alien. He held his hands open in front of him in what his education told him was a safe and non-threatening gesture.

"We come to you in peace," he said.

The alien held its hands out in a position similar to Max's and produced a burst of short clacks. The other alien clacked rapidly next to the ship. The first alien turned to listen, then faced Max again and hit a button on the contraption in front of its mouth.

"Right, sorry about that," it said, its voice high and buzzing as it came through the device. "Forgot to turn the darn thing on. I said I'm glad we finally found someone to talk to."

"We come to you in peace," Max said.

"Ah. Fantastic. Well, my sweetheart over there and I were hoping you could help us with a little problem."

"We will assist you with anything we can. We are your friends. My name is Maxwell Whiten. This is Earth. I am its representative."

"Earth. Is that really what you call it?"

"Yes. Earth. I am its ambassador. We welcome you here."

"That's so sweet," said the alien. "But really we weren't planning on staying. We're going to this festival in Xxyqhtlick and got lost. Thought you could help us."

"Help you?"

"Yes. I think we're just a few quadrants from it. Pretty sure. You know the place, Xxyqhtlick? Big ball of gas? Inverted temporal relativity?"

"What... how..?"

"The manipulation of time. Surely you've heard of this. How else would you achieve intergalactic travel?"

Max was speechless.

"You... you do know how to travel between galaxies, don't you?" asked the alien. "You mean you've never... oh. Oh dear. Oh, I suppose this must all be rather unsettling then, isn't it? Well, that explains all the fanfair behind you. I must appear rather alien to you."

Max did not know how to respond.

"This... this is Earth," he said. "My name is--"

"Hold that thought a moment," said the alien. The other alien had started clacking from beside the ship. The first alien hit a button on its device and clacked rapidly over its shoulder. It turned its device back on.

"My sweetheart says we're in the wrong dimension," it said. "So embarrassing. This is what happens when *one of you*," it gestured with its head to the other alien, "refuses to use directions."

The alien surveyed the crowd behind Max.

"Well, we best be off then," it said.

"You're leaving?"

"Yes. We're very anxious to get to the festival, you see."

"But you could teach us. We can learn so much from you. Join you in exploring the universe."

"Teach you?" said the alien, then gave what Max could not mistake for anything other than laughter. "That's wonderful. No, not for another... I'd say a few thousand years, anyways. Thank you for the offer, though. The universe isn't that great, believe me. Boring in most places. Well, we must be off. You have a delightful rest of your day."

The alien nodded and headed back toward its ship. It touched the side of the craft and a door slid open. Before boarding, it turned to face Max one last time.

"Really is a nice place you have here," it said. "Very... rustic."

The alien boarded and, with a short sucking noise, the spacecraft folded into itself and disappeared.

Max looked at the ground where an alien once stood. A breeze blew by, carrying with it the faint smell of cowshit.

Hammerless

When I was a little girl, my daddy taught me fishing, riding, and even a little hunting. Every Saturday morning, I walked with him into the dense Kansas woods and he taught me something about the sycamores or the gullies or how to handle a gun. I got good with the .22 and then later the old .30-30 Winchester. All my early memories with him are laced with a little gunpowder.

Ma passed away giving birth to me, so it was just me and Daddy on the farm. He grew wheat and sorghum. A drought took the crops in '30 and he had to sell most of the land for near nothing. After that, Daddy owned very little that was worth much, save for a Smith and Wesson Hammerless my granddaddy won in a bet. The gun was powerful and could put daylight through just about anything. Firing it was my favorite thing in the world.

In high school, Ernest started showing an interest to me. He looked nice enough, tall and slim with dark gray eyes. His family owned Mayweather Mining. Daddy thought he'd be a good prospect on account of he was well off, so I started spending time with him.

Ernest made it clear early on he wasn't gonna wait for marriage to have his way with me. He'd tell me to walk with him on his family's acres until no one could see us and then his voice would get small and low. He'd say something like "my, this sure is good weather we're having" and put his hands and his mouth on me. I was scared to stop him. Ernest got mean when he didn't have his way. On one of our first walks, we found a stray dog. He was crouched, petting it, when his

boater fell off. The dog started playing with it, tearing a hole at the top. He kicked the mutt so hard it couldn't use its hind parts. I was afraid what he might do if I ever fought him.

When he was inside me, I tried to think of his family's money and property. My daddy had always had it rough. I pictured big meals and easy living if I just went along with Ernest. I thought of the Hammerless, my hand around the polished wood grip, staring down the short, fat barrel and putting a hole through the fear Ernest gave me. Sometimes, alone, I would think of the gun and my hand would wander on my body to the places Ernest touched me.

I was worried I'd get pregnant, so when Ernest proposed not six months in I accepted. We got married at the courthouse because Ernest didn't want to wait for nothing traditional.

It was his eager nature what started the notion of us outlawing in the first place. One morning he saw a picture of John Dillinger in the paper, dashing and defiant and smug, and came at me jabbing a finger at Dillinger's profile while I tended to breakfast.

"All I need's a gun, Martha," he said.

"I guess so," I said.

"You know, your daddy never gave me a gift for wedding you."

"He doesn't have much since they took his land."

"He owes me, though, doesn't he? By right."

"What else he got that you want?"

"He's got that gun. The lemon-squeezer."

"That old Hammerless? You have a good job. You don't need no trouble with banks."

"Won't be no trouble. We'll just take their money. Easy as pie."

"What would God say?"

"He'd say to mind what I'm telling you. We do this, we can afford whatever we want. Get your daddy his land back, too, I reckon. No more living hand-to-mouth for him."

"No one gets hurt," I said.

Ernest was studying Dillinger's picture in the paper again.

"That'll be me next," he said.

"Promise me no one gets hurt."

"Okay, I promise."

"Fine then."

"Hot damn."

"Language, Ernest."

A foul mouth makes foul thoughts, my daddy always said.

Ernest told everyone we were finally taking our honeymoon. His parents lent us their Ford Model A and a telephone for Daddy. After a long talk with Ernest, my daddy gave him the Hammerless.

"Be safe out there," Daddy said.

"Just don't sell the telephone," I told him. "I'll call you every day I can."

I got us a gunny sack from the neighbors and Ernest had me look at a map and commit our route to memory. He fashioned a piece of wood to look like a gun for me to bluff with in the banks. I told him it looked foolish, but he said if it was

good enough for Dillinger it was good enough for me. Said Dillinger used one to get hisself out of prison. I kindly asked him not to mention prison again.

We headed west. Ernest proved right away he was no good at driving.

"I should be riding shotgun anyways," said Ernest. "I'm the one with the heater. How am I gonna fire and steer at the same time anyhow?"

"I could hold the gun while you drive," I said.

"Like hell."

"Language."

"We're outlaws now. We don't need to worry about that language stuff no more."

"No one is outside the word of God."

"You and God get behind the steering wheel."

We hit three banks without a hitch. I was nervous, the wooden gun shaking in my hands while Ernest collected the money. I'd steadied myself by the fourth bank, a Cheatham National. I held the fake weapon firm, pointing it at the bank goers lying on the floor while Ernest spat with a teller who wouldn't cooperate.

"You've any idea who you're messing with?" Ernest said. "This is the Mayweather Gang! Ain't you heard of us by now?"

"I'm sorry," said the teller. "But I'm entrusted to watch over this money. It's my sworn oath, and I aim to honor it."

"You'll be honoring a pine box you say no to me again."

"You do what you think right. But I'm not giving you a penny."

Ernest cold-cocked him with the Hammerless. The gun went off and a put a bullet through the wall behind the teller. A woman in the bank started screaming.

"We need to get out of here," I said.

"But the money."

"Cuss the money. The whole state just heard that gun fire."

We ran for the Model A parked at the curb beside the bank. I put it into gear and sped away. The town was easy to navigate and soon we were breathing country air.

"Didn't have to chase me out so damn quick," Ernest said.

"Language, Ernest," I said.

"Rat's ass."

We made it a good fifty miles before Ernest told me to pull over for lunch. I parked in the shade of a grove of brittle crab apples. Pink blossoms coated in dust fought against the wind. Ernest got the pail and I carried a thermos bottle of coffee. We sat against the side of the car to protect our food from the wind and grit.

Ernest took his sandwich and slid the pail to me on the running board. The butt of his gun poked out from the top of his britches. He was halfway done with his ham and mustard before I'd even started. I watched him take two or three bites in one go and swallow it all half-chewed.

"You'll get indigestion that way," I said.

"Figure I know how to eat," he said.

"Got a lot of road before the next town, don't we?"

"What's that got to do with eating?"

"It don't," I said. "I was just observing. You hit that man."

"I didn't have a choice. You heard him. No one talks like that to the Mayweather Gang. We have a reputation now. He's lucky I didn't poke a hole in him."

"You said no one would get hurt."

"I can't know the future, Martha. I ain't a fortune teller."

This is a game to you, I thought. Just a game of taking. See how much the world can give.

"Reckon we'll get the next bank tomorrow?" I asked.

"Reckon we will," he said.

"Think I could maybe try the gun this time?"

Ernest stood and opened the door and climbed into the backseat for a laydown. "Like hell," he said.

"Language," I said, but he'd already shut the door.

The rest of the day we took back roads to keep a low profile. Ever so often we passed the skeleton of a tree or the shell of a house or barn. Everything was covered with brown dust. Even the sky was brown. Sometimes we had to pull over and take a rag to the windshield. Eventually we reached a patch of land that wasn't so upset. It was almost night.

With the twilight and the dust we didn't see the figures walking beside the road until we were almost on them.

"Get up next to them," Ernest said. It was a family of four with a mangy mule pulling a cart half-full of blankets and tools. I couldn't tell the children's ages for all the dirt covering them. They were thin as corn stalks.

Ernest rolled down the window and leaned out.

"You walking this here road yourselves?" he said.

The man motioned his wife to stay put and approached the passenger-side.

"We're not trying to bother nobody," said the man.

"Then we have that much in common, stranger. Where you all headed?"

"West, I guess."

"Well, that's two for two," said Ernest, like a salesman. "You all look like you been a ways already."

"We're not trying to bother nobody."

"And you ain't. No, sir."

Ernest took a stack of bills from the gunny sack and pulled off a couple notes.

"Hard times now," he said. "But I think you'll find this good in most states."

"Sir?"

"Go on, now. It ain't much, but it ain't nothing, either."

"We're not--"

"Trying to bother nobody. Why don't you take some of this money and fix that broken record? Go on. It's yours."

The man still hesitated.

"Lord, Almighty," said Ernest. "What kind of world we gonna live in if a man can't trust the kindness of a stranger? Now you quit standing there like a scarecrow and accept this charity. Ain't nothing against a fella keeps his family fed."

The mother walked up and snatched the bills out of Ernest's hand. "Thank you kindly," she said.

"We best go on 'fore it gets dark," I said.

Ernest leaned back into his seat. He looked half in shock. We drove off. The family quickly disappeared in the dust behind us.

"That woman just clawed the money right out from me," Ernest said.

"That was a kind thing you did," I said. "A Christian thing."

"Course it was," Ernest said.

We continued in silence for a good stretch. The horizon was a thin orange line like a hat band. Ernest sat up, suddenly agitated.

"Ah, drat," he said.

"What? What is it?"

"I didn't tell them who I was."

"What do you mean?"

He looked at me like I was the biggest fool. "How they gonna tell, Martha?"

"How they gonna tell what?"

"How they gonna tell their friends which outlaw gave them that money?"

"We'll have plenty more opportunities, if you need them."

"Dillinger would've told them," he said.

We pulled onto a dirt path that parted a field of withered corn. I drove about a quarter-mile up and parked and turned the headlamps off.

"This spot should be good as any," Ernest said. "I hear nature calling."

While Ernest tended to the corn stalks, I reached into my purse and pulled out the wooden gun. In the dark of night, it almost looked real. But it didn't feel real, at least not the way I imagined a real gun would. It felt light and purposeless and childish, like a toy I was using to play make-believe. I suppose that's exactly what it was.

I stepped out of the car. The crickets were mighty loud, throwing their chirps around in a way that made the world seem big and empty. The stars looked down and I wondered what they saw and what they thought about. I used them to find north and west and looked for Jupiter the way my daddy taught me. I heard the rustle of feet on dead husks and could barely make out Ernest sauntering up to me from the field.

"It's cleared up," he said.

"How's that?"

"All the dust and such. It's cleared up real nice now, ain't it?"

It was his strange, low voice this time. I felt him press against me, kissing my neck and chin and lips, his hands lifting my skirt above my calves, my knees. Just like the first time, the barn, the hay that pricked my bare skin and smelled like mildew and animal. Then and all the other times.

It's cleared up real nice now, ain't it?

I was angry at Ernest. More than that, I was tired of him. Always having his way. I wanted something on my own terms. Whatever I could get. I didn't care so long as it was mine.

I thought of the gun in his waistband.

"Ernest," I said. He kissed along my throat. His hand was working under my skirt.

"Ernest. I want the gun."

"What?"

"The Hammerless."

I could feel the breath of his laugh on my neck.

"No," he said.

"The gun," I said. "I want you to give it to me."

"I already told you--"

"The grip. I want you to use it on me."

His hand stopped moving.

"Martha?"

"It's okay," I said. "Don't be scared."

"I'm not--"

"I can manage it."

"No."

"Where your hand was. It's okay, I swear."

He jerked his arm away from me and stepped back slow. His eyes were wide and bright with moonlight. A corn husk crunched under his foot. "What in Sam Hill, Martha?"

I felt like a fool. I needed the gun. The power. I just wanted him to share. To give me something of his for a short time. But Ernest wasn't made for sharing. I understood that now. And I hated him for it. I hated that he made me ask.

"I'm tired," I said. I fixed my skirt and turned and walked round to the driver's side and opened the door and climbed into the backseat. I lay down and listened to the crickets. They were really going. I wondered if maybe they were screaming in anger. Maybe they were telling me I'd tried my best. Likely they didn't care anyway.

I started thinking of Ernest and how I'd have to take whatever I wanted from him. I felt angry at him, that he was too selfish to know any better. And I felt sad for myself that I'd have to teach him to give. It was a sorry state I was in. I'd never say the Lord's name in vain, but that night I sure thought it a bunch.

I woke up the next morning to find Ernest leaning against the hood of the car smoking a cigarette. I wasn't sure where he'd slept or if he'd slept and then discovered with shock and a little glee that I didn't much care. I opened the car door and made my way to the front seat and sat in silence while he finished his smoke. When he finally climbed into the Ford with me I was fearful he would retaliate for how I'd spooked him last night, but he just said, "Day's not getting any younger," and then stared out the window at the corn.

We headed to the town of Shiner. Tucked into a corner of the square was a narrow egg-white one-story building with a dusty sign: "Common Union Savings Bank." I drove around the square to get an idea of the town and to see how busy the roads were. Ernest looked for patrolmen.

"I think we're alright," he said after the third lap.

"We need gas," I said.

Ernest glared at me. I knew he was anxious to stick up the bank soon as he'd seen it. Something he wanted became something he needed awful quick in his mind.

"We should hit the bank now while the town's clear of trouble," he said.

"It will only take a minute. We might need to drive a while out of here without stopping. Remember last time, with the cops."

The town's filling station was catty-corner to the bank. Ernest scowled but kept silent as I pulled into the station. A jockey dressed in faded whites came trotting over. He looked confused when he saw I was in the driving seat.

"Fill her up, ma'am?" he asked, wringing his hands in a towel.

"Yes, please," I said. I turned to Ernest. "I need to step inside."

The station smelled like coffee and metal and grease. I approached the clerk at the counter. He was lanky and young, not yet twenty.

"Excuse me, sir," I said. "You wouldn't have a telephone, would you?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am."

He reached under the counter and pulled it out. It was big and black and shining with brass polish.

"Brand new Bell," he said.

"It's just darling," I said.

I lifted the receiver. The young clerk grinned at me, admiring.

"I'm real sorry," I said to him. "But do you think I could make this call in private? It will only take a minute, I promise."

The clerk looked at the counter as if it might whisper an answer. "I'm not supposed to... well, but I guess... one minute, sure."

"You're a dear."

I smiled and waited for him to leave. When he was gone, I took the fake wooden gun out of my purse and tossed it onto a shelf and dialed the telephone. The operator put me through.

"Daddy," I said.

"Bug," he said. "How are you? How's the honeymoon?"

"Oh, it's just fine. Ernest and I are almost to Colorado."

"Well, I'll be. My little one's gonna cross over state lines. You be careful of the dust now."

"We will," I said. "Actually, Daddy, Ernest and I are having such a grand time, we thought maybe we'd stay gone a little while longer."

"Longer?"

"I just don't want you to worry. No matter what, I don't want you to worry none about us."

"I'm not worried about you, Bug," said Daddy. "It's just Ernest, well--"

"He's with me."

"He don't always see what's in front of him."

"Yes. I know."

"How's the Ford treating you?"

"It's real nice."

"He ever let you drive it?"

"Oh, plenty. Listen--"

"That's fine. That's good of him."

"Alls I wanted to say is I love you, Daddy."

"I know, Bug," he said. "I love you too."

"Well, Ernest is waving for me. He's eager to resume this here adventure."

"You send him my best, now."

"Oh, I will."

The jockey was done pumping by the time I got back from the station.

Ernest had kept most of the money in the gunny sack but he couldn't help showing off a thin stack of high-end dollars to the jockey. He pulled a bill out and gave it to the man.

The jockey stammered. "We can't--"

"Naw, you keep the rest," Ernest said, and they both grinned like they'd just come out of a peep show.

I started the car and we made our way slow to the bank.

"What was you doing?" Ernest asked me.

"Needed to call my daddy," I said.

"Why, what for?"

"Just needed to call him is all."

"You always calling your daddy. You're too close to him."

"He's family."

"Well, so am I, now."

"You want I should call you from the filling station?"

"What--no, Martha. Blast it. Don't try those head games with me."

We were almost to the bank.

"Get up right on the corner there," Ernest said, pointing to the front of the bank. I parked at the curb. Ernest jumped out the car and started sauntering to the bank. I got my purse and followed him.

The bank was near empty. A row of empty benches, which might have seen some action in the bank's better days, stood against the far wall. Large windows facing the street let in great columns of sun. Heavy dust played in the sunlight. An older woman in a dress near its twilight years was in conversation with the teller, an ancient sort. The woman was holding a small white dog. To the right of the teller was a door with a sign marked "OFFICE" and next to that, "VAULT."

Ernest paraded around the bank like a rooster, putting on a show. The woman and the teller and even the dog stared in curiosity. Satisfied he'd been noticed, Ernest pulled out the Hammerless.

"This is a stick up," he said. He aimed his gun at the teller. "Don't you even think about getting no firearm of your own now. You hear?"

The teller slowly raised his hands into the air.

"Ernest," I said.

The woman with the dog looked at Ernest like she was trying to spot the sleight of hand in a magic trick.

"Don't you worry none, ma'am," said Ernest. "We didn't come for your money. We don't want the common folk's money. We're common folk too. We're the Mayweather gang. It's the bank's money we want. It's the banks what took our possessions and such, ain't it?"

"Ernest," I said again.

"What you got in that vault," Ernest said to the teller. "I want it. You're gonna open it up for me."

"My money's in that vault," the woman said.

"We won't take yours," Ernest said.

"Ernest," I said.

"What, Martha?" Ernest looked over his shoulder at me.

"I don't have it."

"What do you mean?"

"It's not in my purse."

"Where is it?"

"I don't rightly know."

"Well check the car," he said. His gun was moving between the teller and the woman while he fixed his attention on me. The woman had her eyes set on the barrel and was clutching her dog to her chest.

"We don't have that kind of time," I said.

"Then just stay here and keep a lookout," he said. "I need to get in the vault."

"How am I gonna stop this woman from getting help?"

"She can come with, then."

"What if someone else comes in? What if a cop drops in? Ernest. Just let me have the gun while you're in the vault. You afraid that old teller's gonna jump you?"

That did it for Ernest.

"Alright, fine," he said. "God blast it. But soon as we skedaddle I want it back."

He handed me the gun.

"I promise," I said and aimed at his foot and pulled the trigger. Ernest howled and collapsed, writhing in a square of sun on the floor. Under his shoe was slick with blood.

"Lord," he said. "Oh Lord, Almighty." He started screaming.

A crowd was forming outside the bank. I knew the cops would be showing soon.

"I'm leaving," I said to Ernest. "Gonna find me some new banks, maybe. This one's spoiled."

I pointed the gun at the crowd and they backed away from the entrance.

"Gonna clear up real nice now, Ernest."

I stepped out of the bank and shot into the air and the crowd scattered. While everything was confusion, I got in the car, set the Hammerless on the passenger seat, and drove away.